When the Devil Smiles Back

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When the Devil Smiles Back

by GoldenUsagi

Summary

Four years after his escape, Hannibal Lecter is once again imprisoned at the hospital in Baltimore. He's the same as ever, except that he refuses to discuss Will Graham, who there hasn't been a trace of in years. When the Buffalo Bill killings start, FBI trainee Clarice Starling is sent to interview him, and Hannibal has his interest piqued. But it’s not for reasons anyone would suspect, and as usual, his motivations are all about Will. A remix of Silence of the Lambs, where Clarice finds herself occupied not only with catching Buffalo Bill, but with unraveling the mystery of what exactly happened to Will Graham. And Hannibal knows more than he’s letting on about both.

Notes

This series has been translated into Chinese here and here.

Beta'd by Elaminator.

Chapter 1

Clarice Starling hadn't expected a summons from Agent Crawford, but she went to see him immediately after receiving it. He wasn't the sort of man you kept waiting.

Crawford wasn't in his office when she arrived, but she was told to go on in. Clarice did so, leaving the door open behind her. She started to sit down, but her attention was caught by the board covered with information about the Buffalo Bill killings. Five girls, all partially skinned and each dumped in a different river.

It was a national headline, and the subject of much speculation at the Academy, but this was the first time she had seen anything official related to the case.

"Good, you're here," a brusque voice said.

Clarice turned around, directing her attention away from the board. "Good morning, Mr. Crawford."

He nodded in reply, shutting the door behind him. Crawford sat at his desk and gestured for her to take a seat opposite as he set his coffee down.

"Clarice Starling," he said, glancing at the open folder on his desk. "Double major in Psych and Criminology, graduated magna. This says when you graduate from our program, you want to work for me in Behavioral Science."

"Yes, sir." She nodded. "Very much."

"I have to say you're doing well here."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir."

Crawford closed the folder and crossed his hands over it. "But you're wondering why I called you in. A job's come up and I thought of you. Well, let's call it an interesting errand. We're interviewing all serial killers in custody for a behavioral profile, but the last name on the list —well, he's not known for being cooperative. I want you to talk to him today."

Clarice leaned forward in her chair. "Who's the subject?"

"Hannibal Lecter."

Her mouth fell open; she quickly closed it. "Hannibal Lecter," she breathed.

"How familiar are you with the case?"

"I've done a fair amount of reading on it," Clarice said, "both during my classes at UVA and after he was captured again. It's an area of interest, and the most famous serial killer case of the modern era, not to mention being of local significance."

She swallowed nervously as she finished, suddenly remembering that she was actually talking to a man who almost died in Hannibal Lecter's kitchen. "I'm sorry, sir, I—"

"Never mind, Starling. You can see why I don't expect him to be cooperative. But we have to report that we tried. It's also why I want someone new to interview him."

"I understand."

"If he's uncooperative, I want a basic report. How does he look? What did he say? Dr. Chilton hasn't been as forthcoming with details as he once was, and it's in everyone's best interest to know as much about Hannibal as possible."

"Yes, sir." She nodded again.

Crawford handed her a stack of papers. "Here's the information on Hannibal Lecter—reacquaint yourself with it. The questionnaire for him is here, as well as a special ID for you. I want your report on my desk by noon tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. But may I just ask, why the urgency?" Clarice glanced again at the wall covered with case notes. Dr. Lecter had once consulted for the FBI, before his incarceration. "Do you think he knows something about Buffalo Bill?"

Crawford shook his head. "I wish he did. No, I want your full attention on this. Get him to complete the interview. Keep the conversation on topic and don't tell him anything personal. You want to get him talking, not the other way around. And never, never forget what he is."

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else?"

There was a pause, and Crawford sighed. "Do not under any circumstances bring up the name Will Graham."

Clarice had been warned about Dr. Chilton beforehand. She knew, of course, about the burns he had suffered at the hands of the Tooth Fairy, but she was surprised at what four years plus the best skin grafts and plastic surgeons money could buy could do. The skin on his face was irregular, but skillfully applied makeup mostly gave him an even, if false, look. Dr. Chilton would never again be a handsome man, but he was far from what she was expecting.

He ushered her into his office in a manner that was subdued, yet condescending. "So Jack Crawford has sent you to do what all others cannot."

"I don't know about that, sir. It's a very simple questionnaire."

"And what does he hope to learn from this questionnaire?"

"I couldn't say."

"Mm. Hannibal Lecter is the hospital's most prized patient. We get a lot of detectives here, you know, still trying to unravel his psyche after all these years, even though more informed

authorities have already spoken." Dr. Chilton leaned on his cane as he ran his eyes over her. "Though I do not think the hospital has seen anyone as attractive as you since dear Dr. Bloom left for greener pastures with her wife. I would say Jack is being clever, but you are not Hannibal's type." He smirked. "Not nearly scruffy enough."

He was talking about Will Graham, she realized with a start. Then she focused back on the matter at hand and forced a smile. "Well, then I'll have nothing to worry about, will I?"

"Quite. Shall I show you the way?"

"Please do."

Clarice followed him out of the office and started down the hall. Dr. Chilton talked as they walked.

"Of course he was imprisoned here before, though that was not under my care. Dr. Bloom got an extremely secure cell built specially to contain him, though she went overboard on the design, in my opinion. Still, it is here, so it must be used." They came to a staircase, which Dr. Chilton began to descend slowly. Clarice measured her pace so as not to outdistance him. He continued talking. "He has been in my care for nine months, ever since he was recaptured in Florence. He slit a man's throat and threw him off a bridge before police managed to subdue him. After the international transfer of custody, he was delivered to my door, where he belongs."

They had reached the basement level, and the hallway ended in sets of bars. In front of them, there was a man sitting at a workstation.

Dr. Chilton turned to her. "Barney will buzz you in. Do not touch the glass. Pass him nothing but paper, and no paperclips or staples in his paper. If he attempts to pass you anything, do not accept it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He gave her a final smirk. "Also, your entire conversation will be recorded, though of course I would be delighted to hear whatever original insights you think you have gleaned from the exchange."

Clarice nodded again, and with that, he turned his back on her and started up the stairs once more.

She turned around, and the man at the desk greeted her with a friendly smile. "Hi, I'm Barney."

"Clarice Starling." She held out a hand.

He took it. "Nice to meet you, Clarice. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Barney pushed a button and the bars began to slide back. “You’ll do fine. And I’ll be right here.”

“Thank you.” Clarice smiled again and stepped through.

The bars began to shut behind her, and she started to walk down the brick hallway. Ahead of her there was another set of bars, and it slid open as she approached it. Beyond that, the hallway was a dead end.

To her left was a set of wooden doors. Clarice stood in front of them for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and pushed one open.

The room was nothing like a jail cell, and she had to remember not to stare. There was paneling on the walls, giving the air of an office from another age. But the illusion was shattered by the floor to ceiling glass that bisected the room, and the man who was standing beyond it.

Dr. Lecter stood in the center of his cell, his hands at his sides in a posture of attention. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Dr. Lecter,” she said, approaching the middle of the room. “My name is Clarice Starling. May I speak with you?”

His eyes narrowed faintly as he studied her. “Jack Crawford sent you.”

“Yes, he did.”

“May I see your identification?”

“Of course.” She held out her badge.

The corners of his mouth turned up. “A little closer, if you please.”

Reminding herself that there was nothing he could do to her through the glass, she took two more steps.

He peered at her badge. “You’re not real FBI. Another gifted special investigator, perhaps?” The slightly mocking tone in his voice told her that he thought she was no such thing.

“I’m still in training at the Academy.”

That earned her a look of surprise, before a grin slid into place. “Jack Crawford sent a trainee to me? I hope he told you what I did to the last one.”

“I’ve read the file, yes.”

“It’s been a while since I heard from Uncle Jack. Whatever can he want now? The same as always, I expect.”

Clarice held out her papers. “I have a questionnaire, Dr. Lecter. I’d be pleased if you could answer it for me.”

“Why would I do that?” He folded his hands behind his back.

“I’m here to learn from you. If you’ll let me.”

“Have you no more instructors at the Academy?”

“None so accomplished as you, Doctor.”

Dr. Lecter seemed amused at that. “May I see the questionnaire?”

“Of course.”

“Pass it through, please,” he said, nodding at the metal carrier on one side of the room.

“Yes, thank you.” Clarice readjusted the strap of her bag and walked to the carrier. She put the papers inside, closed the drawer, and stepped back.

He moved to retrieve the papers and began perusing them. “Jack must be busy indeed if he can’t spare a real agent for this task. Or perhaps he’s just falling back on old habits.”

“What habits would those be?”

“To catch a killer, one must be able to enter a unique headspace. To succumb and see the world from a completely different point of view.” Dr. Lecter idly flipped a page and then looked up at her. “I can smell Jack’s desperation from here. He will never be able to perceive Buffalo Bill himself, and so he comes running in the guise of you, desperate to get the opinion of his last resort.”

“I’m—I’m here to interview you,” she stammered. “I’m not here for Buffalo Bill.”

“Of course you are,” Dr. Lecter said dismissively. “You just didn’t know it. Or perhaps you guessed, but then were misdirected.” Then he folded the papers and put them back in the carrier, before taking a few steps away. “Please tell Jack that this questionnaire was lacking in fundamentals. Even Frederick has asked better questions than that.”

Clarice moved to take the questionnaire back. Since he had brought it up, she was compelled to ask, “Do you know something about Buffalo Bill, Doctor?”

“I’ve read about him. What a naughty boy he is. I don’t expect to be getting any phone calls from him, but one never knows.”

Clarice pressed her lips together. “Is there anything you could tell me about him? Any thoughts or insights you might share?”

Dr. Lecter simply looked at her for a long moment, before stepping close to the glass. She forced herself not to move back and met his gaze squarely. His expression barely changed,

though there was a shift in his features nonetheless—but it was something indefinable, something she couldn't classify.

"How many girls has he killed so far?" he asked.

"Five."

"There will be another one soon."

"Yes, probably. Very soon."

The corners of his mouth turned up, and his eyes glittered in a peculiar way. "Wouldn't you like to stop him?"

"Yes." She swallowed. "Yes, I would."

"Bring me the case file. Tomorrow." He leaned forward and added in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'll help you catch him."

Clarice's heart sped up, and she stared at him in surprise. "Thank you," she said, recovering herself. "I appreciate it very much. I will. But may I ask why you'd do that?"

Dr. Lecter regarded her evenly. "I have little to delight myself with here, as you can see. But serial killers always seem to liven things up nicely." A pleased smile settled over his face. "The Red Dragon certainly did."

Clarice typed up her report that afternoon, describing Dr. Lecter's physical state and summarizing his comments and displayed emotions to the best of her ability. She took a copy to Crawford's office before five o'clock. She hoped he would appreciate the quick and thorough turnaround, but more than that, since Dr. Lecter had offered his assistance on the Buffalo Bill case, time was now a factor.

Afterward, she changed into her sweats to go for an evening run on the course, making a mental note to follow up on her report tomorrow morning.

She needn't have bothered; when she got off the course, there was a voicemail on her phone telling her to be in his office tomorrow at eight sharp.

Clarice spent the rest of the evening reading articles that had been written during Dr. Lecter's trial. His capture and subsequent imprisonment had been the top news story for months. Every media outlet in the Western world had covered it in some form or other. The articles were littered with the expected gruesome details, and many educated opinions about why Dr. Lecter was what he was.

Throughout all of them, two things remained constant—Dr. Lecter's unapologetic and almost gleeful countenance, and the stony glare of Will Graham.

“I want you to go back and talk to Hannibal today,” Crawford said, immediately after she was seated. “I don’t expect him to give us anything useful, but we have to try.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Since you got him talking, you’ll be the one to continue with him. You’ll take the full Buffalo Bill case file to him. See what he makes of it.”

She nodded. “Sir, what do you make of his offer to help with this?”

“Most likely, he’s bored. Don’t get the wrong idea, that doesn’t mean he’s going to be satisfied with analyzing a new killer. There’s every chance that the real game here is going to be misdirection. Pay close attention to what he actually says. Get anything you can from him, but don’t take it at face value. And I want a detailed report on all of it. We may be able to dig a kernel of truth out, and that could make all the difference.”

“Yes, sir.” Clarice paused. “That’s really why you sent me there, isn’t it? To get his help on Buffalo Bill? If that was the case, I just wish I was in on it, sir, that’s all.”

Crawford gave her a hard stare. “If you’d gone in with an actual agenda, Hannibal wouldn’t have cooperated. He would have toyed with you and then turned to stone. We needed to bait him.” Crawford pushed a set of folders across the desk to her. “Two copies of the Buffalo Bill file. You’re talking to Hannibal Lecter about it, so get familiar with all the details.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, Dr. Chilton is expecting you at one this afternoon. He hinted that getting a peek at the details of this newest killer would only be fair in exchange for the access he’s providing us. If he says as much to you, let him see everything we have on Buffalo Bill. It’s a small price to pay if it leads to anything that helps us catch him.”

Clarice was greeted at the hospital by Dr. Chilton, who intimated to her that he would be most gratified if he had an opportunity to satisfy his professional curiosity about Buffalo Bill, and that he might even have his own insights to contribute to the profile.

She handed him her file with a smile before finding her own way down to Dr. Lecter’s cell.

Barney smiled and let her in, and moments later she was once again standing before the glass.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Lecter.”

“Good afternoon.”

“I’ve brought the file on Buffalo Bill,” she said, putting it in the carrier.

“Thank you. If I could have perhaps half an hour to review it, then we could discuss it.”

Clarice nodded. “That would be fine, Doctor.”

She left him then, closing the door behind her and going back down the hallway, pausing to wait for the bars to slide open. She ended spending the time chatting amicably with Barney, asking him about his experiences at the hospital and how he found Dr. Lecter.

“Just follow the rules, and things go fine with him,” Barney said. “I do the restraints anytime someone needs to go into his cell or he needs to be moved. He knows the procedures, and he’s never given me any problems. You be polite, and he’ll be polite back.”

“Were you working here when he was here before?”

He shook his head. “No. I’ve been here three years. But I’ve been in charge of Dr. Lecter’s care since he was brought back in. We get along fine.”

After the half hour was up, Clarice thanked him and returned to Dr. Lecter’s cell.

Instead of using the table in the center of the room, Dr. Lecter was sitting crossed-legged on the floor a short distance from the glass, with various pages from the file spread out around him. He looked up at her as she approached.

“Please, sit,” he said, gesturing in front of him. “I would offer you a chair, but circumstances have made me a poor host, I’m afraid. There was once a chair there, but Frederick had it removed.”

Not about to do anything that would jar Dr. Lecter out of his helpful mood, Clarice sat on the floor facing him. She found her eyes wandering over the papers he had spread out. She belatedly wished that she hadn’t given Dr. Chilton the second copy of Buffalo Bill’s file after all. Then she realized that most of the pictures were facing her, not Dr. Lecter, and that he had arranged them for her viewing.

“Tell me what you see,” he said, resting his elbows on his knees. “Paint a picture of the man behind these acts. Describe him to me.”

Clarice swallowed the reply that she was here for him to do that, not the other way around. She was willing to do whatever she needed to keep him talking. If he wanted to test her, then she was game.

“He’s a white male,” she started. “Serial killers tend to hunt within their own ethnic groups.”

“I didn’t.”

“You’re an exception, Dr. Lecter. This killer is not.”

Amusement flickered across his face, but it was tempered with the expectant look that many of her instructors wore, and he clearly wanted her to continue.

She did. “He’s not a drifter. He’s got his own house. He couldn’t live in an apartment.”

“Why not?”

“Because what he does takes privacy, both before and after. He keeps them alive for three days; then he shoots them and skins them. He lives somewhere that’s isolated, or at least has a fair amount of land around it.”

Dr. Lecter smiled. “Oh, but it’s astonishing what one can do with the proper soundproofing.”

Clarice immediately thought of what was found in Dr. Lecter’s own basement—as he obviously intended her to, given the keen way he was watching her for a reaction. She focused on the matter at hand. “Do you think he has the financial resources for that?”

“No. So you are correct. What else?”

“He’s in this thirties or forties. He’s got real physical strength, combined with an older man’s self-control. He’s not impulsive. He’s cautious, precise… And he’ll never stop.”

Dr. Lecter brought his fingers together. “Because?”

“Because he’s got a real taste for it now.” Her eyes darted back to the pictures, the line of girls so similar and dead. “And he’s getting better at his work.”

“Very good, Clarice. A profile without error, though it will do little to help you catch him. But please indulge my curiosity for a moment—can you tell me why they call him Buffalo Bill? It hasn’t been in the papers, nor is it mentioned here.”

“It started as a bad joke in Kansas City Homicide,” she said bluntly. “They said, ‘This one likes to skin his humps.’”

“Vulgar. And quite erroneous.” Dr. Lecter looked down at the papers again, reaching out to adjust the placement of one of them. Still glancing away, he said, “It occurs to me that you know a great deal about me, but the reverse is not true. Given the assistance I’m providing, perhaps we should remedy that.” He raised his head, his eyes meeting hers.

Clarice was immediately on her guard, the warning about not telling him anything personal ringing in her ears. “Maybe it would be better if we stick to the topic on hand.”

“You’re hungry for advancement, ready to make a name for yourself. Hungry enough to sit here with me and collect whatever insights I offer like a scavenger pecking at the bones. Yet not hungry enough to trade a few simple pleasantries?” He shook his head in mock disappointment. “Then I suppose I shall just have to take what I see without clarification.”

“And what do you see?”

His eyes narrowed fractionally, as if examining her for the first time. “You’re not more than a generation removed from poverty. Your cheap clothes and your accent say as much. All you dreamed about growing up was getting away. Now you’ve earned a college degree and are well on the way to a distinguished career, but that poor little girl still remains, like the currents that churn under calm waters.” He tilted his head. “Formative childhood experiences are difficult to overcome, no matter how much we achieve. The desire to reach for more becomes a background to the entirety of your life, something ever-present and inescapable.”

Clarice swallowed, taking a deep breath. She knew she was here because he was, though insane, a gifted psychiatrist, but it was another thing to have that keen intellect dissecting her. "You see a lot, Doctor," she said. "You do. So I can't imagine what you need my input for."

"Conversations are more interesting if two people take part in them. It's been a while since I had the pleasure of a good conversation."

"Yesterday you implied that you would help with this case for your own amusement, nothing more."

Dr. Lecter folded his hands, and his shoulders moved in a slight shrug. "And as I said, I have little here in the way of amusements. You'll forgive me if I seize any opportunity of adding to them."

Clarice pressed her lips into a thin line, quickly weighing the options. He was pushing her to see what she would do, and she knew it. But if she could find out anything about Buffalo Bill, a few personal details were irrelevant. "We will talk about me and then we will talk about the case," she said, frank. "Agreed?"

"Agreed." There was something dark and pleased in his eyes.

Clarice raised an eyebrow, still trying to figure out what he was playing at. "Am I really so interesting, Doctor?"

"It merely brings me joy to see your dedication to the task at hand," he said smoothly. "What lengths would you go to in order to get the information you need, I wonder. So tell me, where does such drive come from? Why the FBI?"

"My father was the town marshal."

"And he encouraged you to go into law enforcement?"

"No." Clarice shook her head, wondering how he had managed to unearth such a painful memory so quickly. "No, he was killed when I was ten years old. One night he surprised two burglars coming out the back of a drugstore. They shot him."

Dr. Lecter was looking intently at her. "And so you honor his memory by carrying forward with his occupation, walking in his shoes."

Clarice swallowed. "I never put it quite like that to myself, but I suppose. It felt like a calling."

"And what of your mother?"

"My mother died when I was very young. When my father was gone, I had nothing. No one."

"Orphaned," Dr. Lecter said. "I was orphaned myself, for a time. Were you sent to an orphanage? Or into foster care?"

“Not immediately. I lived with my mother’s cousin and her husband in Montana. They had a ranch for sheep and horses.”

“How long did you live there?” Dr. Lecter was leaning slightly forward, the expression on his face attentive and calm. She imagined that was the face he wore so many years ago when he gave therapy.

“Two months.”

“Why so briefly?”

“I ran away.”

“For what reason?”

“I’ll tell you,” she said, holding his gaze, “after I use what I’ve learned here to catch Buffalo Bill.”

Dr. Lecter’s lips quirked, but there was something more contemplative than amused in his eyes, though amusement still lurked. “Very well,” he finally said. “I will hold you to that, Clarice.”

“You may, Doctor. Now, back to Buffalo Bill.”

He glanced down at the pages, before steepling his fingers. “You said he won’t stop, that he’s getting better at his work. What else?”

“I—I don’t know.”

Dr. Lecter stared at her through the glass. “Every killer has a unique pathology. Why do you think he removes their skins?”

“Because it excites him. To keep as a trophy.”

“No. He has no need of trophies.”

“Because he wants to get inside, to see what’s underneath.” Even as she said it, she knew it was wrong. Buffalo Bill had shown no interest in playing with anatomy or taking bodies apart.

Dr. Lecter gave a miniscule shake of his head. “No. Of each particular thing, ask what is it in itself?” He paused. “What does he do, the one you seek?”

“He kills women.”

“That is secondary to his purpose. What need does he serve by killing?”

“Anger. Sexual frustrations. Dominance.”

He stared at her for a long moment, and again she knew none of that was the right answer.

Dr. Lecter gave another small shake of his head, as if he were dismissing her words while at the same time hoping for the correct ones. “You’re not as good at this as Will.”

He said it offhandedly, but her mouth fell open at the name. It was a name she knew better than to mention, something that was completely irrelevant to the task at hand as well as something that would make an enemy of him. So she couldn’t fathom why he would bring it up himself. But it seemed rude to let it sit there unacknowledged, not when he had spoken it first, and not when he was patiently waiting for a reply.

“No, I don’t expect so,” Clarice said slowly. “I don’t think anyone is.” She paused. “Not even you, if you’ll pardon me for saying so.”

“It is a truth, and one I would hardly take offense to. Will had pure empathy and a point of view that was his alone.” Clarice noticed the past tense, but didn’t know if it truly meant anything, or if he had merely used it to be misleading.

“I wandered the corners of his mind many times,” he continued, “but there were turns there that could be navigated only by him.”

After another moment of silence, Clarice asked the question that she couldn’t stop from escaping her lips. “What happened to Will Graham, Dr. Lecter?”

“I did what I thought was best for him, and prevented what my compassion would not allow. But our parting was chaotic, our journey unfinished.”

“You don’t know where he is, do you?” she said softly.

“I have spent many hours imagining his future days.” He smiled fondly, a look that was matched in his eyes and that completely changed his face. It was wholly different from the amused grins she had seen earlier. “He is never far from my thoughts. I have ideas of the places he would go, the people he would encounter, and I envision us walking there together.”

“Would you share any of these ideas with me, Doctor?”

“Perhaps when we next continue our conversation. May I keep the file?” It was a dismissal.

Clarice was disappointed, but she nodded politely. “Yes, of course.”

She took her leave from him, shutting the door to his cell softly behind her.

Chapter 2

When Clarice returned to the main level of the hospital, Dr. Chilton was waiting for her in the hallway. He met her with a severe gaze and gestured to the door of his office with the tip of his cane.

Mentally collecting herself, she followed him in.

“Well,” he said, taking a seat at the desk. “When I likened you to Alana Bloom, I did not know the comparison would be so apt. You do have a way with killers, Miss Starling.”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir,” she said, all the while feeling she knew exactly what he meant.

“Hannibal Lecter has not uttered the name of Will Graham since he was recaptured. So the fact that he mentioned Will to you of own his accord is extremely interesting.”

“I’m as surprised as you are, Dr. Chilton, and I’m far from having your expertise. What do you think it means?”

A frown appeared on his face, though it seemed to be directed more inward than directed at her. “I do not know.”

Clarice leaned forward in her chair. “Sir, what happened to Will Graham? I know no one knows what happened to him, but is there any more to the story than has been released?”

“Precious little.” Dr. Chilton sighed. “The world knows that Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham disappeared after having an encounter with the Tooth Fairy, who intercepted Hannibal’s transport and allowed his escape. The original plan, though I was not privy to it at the time, was to fake an escape and use Hannibal as bait, monitoring Hannibal and the Tooth Fairy throughout. That did not happen.” He paused. “The Tooth Fairy’s body was later found, and we have footage of Hannibal suffering from a gunshot wound before he moves out of frame, presumably to do something that led to the Tooth Fairy’s demise. The body was not discovered right away, as Hannibal led him to a location that was unknown to the FBI at the time.

“There were no real clues as to the fate of Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham. Their blood was found both inside and outside the house, though the majority of it belonged to Will. Some of it was quite near the cliff face, but there was no evidence of a fall found below. Though that means little, as the ocean has a way of swallowing evidence. That is where Will Graham ends —there has not been a trace of him since that night. Hannibal, on the other hand, was seen on camera twice in the following months, confirming his survival, though none of those sightings were timely enough to lead to his arrest.”

“I’m surprised there weren’t more sightings.”

“Even Jack Crawford cannot monitor every camera in the world. After so many months without leads, combing through the daily footage of airports and train stations was no longer feasible. As for the public, news fades and attention wanes. I am sure Hannibal has been recorded on any number of private security cameras, but private cameras are a precaution only, never looked at unless a crime has occurred. The images we have were only procured because someone happened to look at the screen at the right moment and happened to recognize what they were looking at, after the fact, unfortunately. The only eyewitness account we have between Hannibal’s escape and the sighting that led to his recapture is the testimony of Dr. du Maurier. Are you familiar with it?”

Clarice nodded, repressing a shudder. Bedelia du Maurier had called emergency services and been discovered missing a leg, the remnants of which were on her dining room table.

“Dr. du Maurier claims that both Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter visited her for dinner the previous night, though she was heavily drugged and cannot be counted as entirely reliable,” Dr. Chilton said. “It is a certainty that Hannibal was there, but no evidence of Will was found at the scene. A handwritten card was left by Hannibal, indicating that he very much enjoyed their evening and would call on her again sometime in the future to enjoy another. She was understandably relieved when she heard of Hannibal’s capture, though was less reassured when similar intelligence of Will failed to follow.”

“Do you think Will Graham is still alive, Dr. Chilton?”

“I do not know. Officially, he is missing and presumed dead.” He paused, swiveling in his chair. “I assume you address these questions to me because you cannot discuss them with Jack Crawford?”

“Yes, sir. The last agent who brought up Will Graham to Mr. Crawford—well, there didn’t end up being much of a discussion. It was more like an explosion.” When Crawford had told her not to mention Will to Dr. Lecter, he had warned her and closed the subject, and she had known better than to press for anything more.

Dr. Chilton nodded. “Will Graham is Jack Crawford’s greatest failure. He considers it a failing beyond that of having Hannibal Lecter under his nose and not realizing what he was. Jack brought them together, in his ignorance believing that he was helping Will, when all the while he was throwing him to his undoing. I honestly do not know which idea lies on Jack more heavily—that Will Graham died that night, or that he willfully followed Hannibal Lecter.”

“They still talk about Will Graham at the Academy. Unofficially, I mean.”

“And what do they say?”

“Mostly the same thing that the tabloids did, with the embellishments that grow from being passed through a student body,” Clarice said. “Will Graham is something between a cautionary tale and an urban legend now. They talk about his gift and how it went wrong, how he fell in with Dr. Lecter and became a killer.”

“Mm.” Dr. Chilton was contemplative. “Loath as I am to say it, there is no evidence that Will Graham has committed any crimes that were not self-defense or sanctioned by Jack Crawford in his bid to catch Hannibal Lecter. However, there are an absurd number of blanks in the story, and many things to which only Hannibal and Will were privy. I myself have personal grievances against Will Graham that have nothing to do with his propensity for murder. He has a great capacity for manipulation, and no qualms about using it. In my opinion, he is capable of anything.

“I once thought Will was responsible for Hannibal’s murders,” he continued. “I was incorrect about that. But I maintain that Will is of unique interest to the psychiatric community. There is not a word for what he is. There is not a word for what Hannibal Lecter is. And they are drawn to each other’s viewpoints like moths to a flame. And the one that is drawn closest never fails to get burned, though that does not stop it from returning.” Dr. Chilton rotated slightly in his chair, before clasping his hands together. “Jack was in here for three months after Hannibal’s capture, trying to elicit the fate of Will Graham from him. Hannibal spoke of many things, confessed to many of the murders he had committed during his liberty, but he never once answered questions about Will. I tried myself, of course, with different techniques, but I regret to say that I was also unsuccessful. I would say that he does it simply to play with us, but I feel there is something else there as well.”

In her mind, Clarice once again saw the expression on Dr. Lecter’s face as he talked about Will. It was real, not something faked or performed. Of that, if nothing else, she was sure. “Maybe he doesn’t want to share,” she said. “Because memories are all he has left.”

“Perhaps,” Dr. Chilton agreed, looking thoughtful. “He is probably dead, then.”

He didn’t sound at all sorry at the thought.

Clarice spent the evening preparing her report on that day’s visit with Dr. Lecter, then going back over what he said and trying to see whatever he had seen in the Buffalo Bill file.

She delivered her report to Crawford’s office the next morning, though he wasn’t in. It was just as well, as she had a training exercise and a class to attend. Still, all morning her thoughts kept straying back to Dr. Lecter and Buffalo Bill.

After lunch, she nearly ran into Crawford as she rounded a corner near the classrooms.

“Starling, I was coming to get you. Come with me,” he said, already moving past her.

She fell into step beside and slightly behind him.

“We’ve got another body,” he said, as they made their way down the hallways. “Like all of them since the first one, it wasn’t weighted down, just dumped. It washed up yesterday in Elk River, West Virginia. It’s been in the water a week, so there’s no trace evidence, but it’s been brought in. Price and Zeller are going to do an examination. I want you to observe.”

“Yes, sir.”

After an elevator ride, they walked through the glaring stainless steel level that contained the morgue and the labs, Crawford leading the way to where a young woman's body lay on a table, dirty and bloated from being in the water. Clarice forced herself to look, difficult though it was. It would be her job to get justice for girls like this, and she couldn't do that if she couldn't look.

There were two men standing nearby.

"Price, Zeller, this is Clarice Starling. She's the one who's been talking to Dr. Lecter."

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen," Clarice said.

"Likewise," Zeller said.

"I would shake your hand," Price said, gesturing to the gloves he already wore and the hand that was already touching the body, "but we frown on biohazards."

Clarice nodded, putting on the gloves that Zeller handed her.

Crawford folded his arms and said, "So what do we have?"

"No deviation from the others so far," Zeller said. "There's no evidence of rape or physical abuse prior to death. All the mutilation you see is post mortem."

"There's an entrance wound over the sternum," Price said, moving around the body. "She was shot straight through."

"Starling?" Crawford said. "What do you see?"

Clarice cleared her throat. "Her fingernails are broken off." She touched the hand. "There's dirt or grit under them."

Price moved in with a scraper and a small plastic jar, extracting a sample from underneath the nails.

"She tried to claw her way through something," Clarice said, trying not to show the sadness she felt. "She fought hard to get away."

Zeller was taking pictures, moving around and recording from different angles. He did her head and face last, and then handed the camera to Clarice to hold.

"All right," he said to Price. "Let's flip her."

Clarice looked down at the camera in her hands, glancing at the last photograph, which was still displayed on the screen. She frowned, and then looked closer.

"Wait," she said. "She's got something in her throat."

"Get a light," said Crawford.

Zeller swiveled the light over as Price leaned down and extracted something from her throat with a long set of tweezers.

Crawford frowned. “What is that? Some kind of seed pod?”

“No,” Price said. “It’s a bug cocoon. There’s no way that got in there by itself.”

“Why would he put a cocoon in her throat?” Crawford asked, seemingly to himself.

“I’ll try to identify the species. It might give us something.” Price dropped the cocoon into an evidence jar.

“Good catch, Starling,” Crawford said.

“Thank you, sir,” Clarice said absently. Something was niggling at the back of her mind.

Crawford motioned with his hand. “All right, flip her.”

Price and Zeller did so, revealing the two large diamond-shaped sections of missing skin on her back. Zeller began measuring the depth of the wounds.

Clarice crossed her arms, trying to pinpoint what was gnawing at her. Then she realized. “Mr. Crawford?”

“What is it?”

“I need to view the itemized records about the contents of Dr. Lecter’s basement.”

Clarice had done a fair amount of reading about Dr. Lecter during the time she was completing her degrees. With majors of Psychology and Criminology, his name couldn’t help but come up, and she had become interested in the case.

And there was something about a moth in a throat that was distantly familiar.

Many of the details of what had been found in his basement were a matter of public record, and others had been leaked. She’d seen a list once, on a true crime website, of items that had been there. Now, looking at the FBI logs of what it had taken a whole team weeks to document, she saw how little information had truly gotten out. Her stomach turned at the almost never-ending list of grisly discoveries.

Eventually, however, she happened upon what she thought she remembered.

“Here it is,” she said to Crawford, who she’d called when she found the listing. “There was a man’s head in a jar in Dr. Lecter’s basement. He also had a moth in his throat.”

Crawford stood behind her, looking at the screen over her shoulder.

There was a picture of the head, both in and out of the jar, and a cursory description.

“Could we examine it again?” Clarice asked.

Crawford shook his head. “All the human remains from Hannibal Lecter’s basement were destroyed years ago.” He exhaled. “This victim was male, but the similarity of the moth is too much to be coincidence, especially as Hannibal seems to know something he’s not telling us. We’ve had copycats before.”

“You think someone is copying Dr. Lecter?”

“Possibly. This was public knowledge. See what you can find out about it from him tomorrow. And Starling? Good work.”

The next morning, Clarice was preparing to leave for Baltimore when breaking news interrupted the program she’d had on as background noise. As soon as she heard the words ‘Buffalo Bill’ she stopped what she was doing and turned up the TV. Her stomach dropped when she heard that another girl had been taken.

“—she lived at this apartment complex in Memphis, Tennessee. The circumstances of her disappearance are identical to the kidnappings of Buffalo Bill, and she’s believed to be his latest victim. Catherine’s purse and shopping bags were found this morning in the parking lot, as well as a sliced blouse, in what has become a grim, too-familiar calling card. Catherine Martin is the twenty-five-year-old daughter of Senator Ruth Martin, the Republican senator from Tennessee. Her kidnapping is not considered to be politically motivated, but it has stirred government to its highest levels. Just moments ago, Senator Martin taped this personal plea—”

Clarice’s phone rang. She answered it automatically. “Yes?”

It was Crawford. “Are you still here?”

“Yes, sir. Do you need to see me?”

“No. I assume you’ve seen the news?”

“I have.”

“We need to close this case,” he said. His voice was hard and she could hear the frustration behind it. “Catherine Martin was taken last night. That means we have two and a half days to find her before the national headline becomes FBI failure to protect a senator’s daughter. It’s more important than ever that you get Hannibal Lecter to talk.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Do whatever it takes. We have to catch Buffalo Bill.”

“I understand,” Clarice repeated. “I’m leaving right now.”

Dr. Lecter was standing in his customary place in the center of the cell when she walked in.

“Good morning, Clarice.”

“Good morning, Dr. Lecter.” Clarice jumped right in, saying, “Another girl was taken last night, Catherine Martin, from Memphis, Tennessee.”

He had been paying attention already, but something in his eyes sparked at that. “Indeed?”

“Yes. Now, that adds some urgency to my visit, but the reason I’m here is that I’ve discovered new pieces of evidence in the case.”

His face brightened further. “Have you found something interesting?”

“There was a body in West Virginia. Skin removed from her back, like the others, but there was a moth cocoon lodged in her throat.”

“Did the others not have a cocoon?”

“We don’t know,” Clarice said, shaking her head. “If there was, it was missed by local law enforcement. Those bodies have been buried now, but we’re working on the assumption that he’s done this with all of them, as he never deviates.”

Dr. Lecter took a step closer. “A safe assumption.”

“Now, eight years ago, this was discovered in your basement.” Clarice pulled the picture out of her bag, and held it up to the glass. “A man’s severed head. He was wearing heavy makeup, and he also had a moth inserted into his throat.”

He inspected the picture like it was something he had never seen before, stepping forward with his hands folded behind his back.

“Obviously you have not been killing these girls,” she said. “But someone is modeling themselves after you. Another admirer, perhaps?”

“This has nothing to do with me.” Dr. Lecter looked almost disappointed in her. “Don’t be distracted by the fruitless straws Jack Crawford grasps at. You were doing so well at thinking for yourself.” His lips quirked. “Dear Jack is falling behind, while you’ve gotten ahead.”

Clarice didn’t acknowledge the joke, which only seemed to amuse him further.

“What’s the connection, Doctor?” she pressed. “Why did you put the moth in his throat?”

“I didn’t. That was a former patient of mine. I did not kill him or stage him thus, merely tucked him away much as I found him.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” he said simply. “I thought he might be useful later. The situation itself was also rather humorous.”

She frowned again, but considered the facts from a new angle. It was possible Dr. Lecter was telling the truth; he had saved evidence as well as body parts from numerous crimes for later use before, though they had usually been from his own.

“All right,” Clarice said slowly. “If you didn’t kill him, then who did?” She decided she didn’t want to know what he found humorous about decapitation.

When he didn’t answer, Clarice stepped closer to the glass in desperation. “What’s the connection, Dr. Lecter? Please, tell me.”

He tilted his head, studying her. “How long do you suppose Catherine Martin has?”

“Not long. Two and a half days, if he keeps to his pattern.”

“How desperately do you want to save her?”

“It’s the thing I want most in the world right now,” she said, completely earnest.

A pleased look glittered in his eyes. “If you go to the place Catherine Martin disappeared, you’ll see something interesting.”

Clarice bit back her disappointment. “I don’t have time for games, Doctor.”

“Not a game,” he said solemnly, still watching her. “The key to finding her will be there.”

She shook her head. “There’s never been any evidence of Buffalo Bill returning to the scene of his crimes.”

“No, nor will he now. He’s much occupied with preparations, I imagine.”

“Do you expect me to find something? That parking lot’s been gone over with a fine-toothed comb by now.”

“I do not refer to evidence left, but rather, something that will occur later in the dead of night. Something that only you will be able to see.” He paused, amusement lurking behind his expression as he added, “I’m afraid others do not have your discerning eye and would completely bungle the affair.”

“You’re telling me to go alone.” Clarice crossed her arms. “I want to save Catherine, I do. But you have a history, Dr. Lecter, of sending people into dangerous situations just to see what will happen.”

Dr. Lecter didn’t deny it. He simply stepped forward, his face once again serious.

His gaze was penetrating as he stared down at her, and she found herself unable to look away. She realized they were close enough that he could have grabbed her clothing through the holes in the glass. “You will be in no danger, I promise you,” he said. “But if you do not go, or if you send someone else in your stead, Catherine Martin will die.”

Clarice wasn't entirely surprised when Dr. Chilton caught her at the top of the stairs.

"Are you going to go?" he asked, picking at some invisible lint on his jacket.

"I suppose I am. I have to. I have to try."

"He could be sending you on a wild goose chase or worse, you realize."

"Maybe. But I can't have any part of Catherine Martin's death on my conscience. And I will if I don't do everything I can to save her." Clarice paused. "Are you going to do anything?"

"You mean am I going to pass Hannibal's tip along to anyone?" Dr. Chilton asked. "Law enforcement has already been told—that is what you are, are you not? I have no further obligations." Then he said, "I have professional interest in Hannibal Lecter, but I do not indulge him, and I do not do his bidding. If you choose to chase after what he promises, that is your affair."

"I understand, sir."

When he didn't say anything else, she adjusted her bag and started to walk past him.

"Miss Starling?"

"Yes?" She turned around.

"I did not do this to myself." It took her a moment to realize he was referring to his disfigurement. "I thought I was in control, but I was not."

Clarice bit her lip. "Did Dr. Lecter lead you to that?"

"No, he did not," Dr. Chilton said. "But Hannibal Lecter is always in control. Do not say I did not warn you."

Clarice couldn't deny that Dr. Chilton's words had unnerved her, but she also couldn't risk the responsibility she would feel if Catherine Martin died simply because she was afraid. Catherine herself was afraid right now, more afraid than Clarice would probably ever be.

Though whenever she thought of Dr. Chilton's warning, her mind couldn't help but replay Dr. Lecter's last words to her as well, particularly that he had used the word 'promise.' The fact that he put stock in keeping promises was part of his pathology, the same as politeness was. And while she didn't consider anything involving him to be safe, she felt that taking his words at their value was correct in this instance.

She left Crawford a message on his phone saying that she was following up on a lead from Dr. Lecter and that while she wasn't sure anything would come of it, she would be gone for the rest of the day. If he wanted more information, he would call her, but she suspected that he had his hands full dealing with the media circus and answering to the higher-ups who would no doubt be demanding instant progress on Catherine's case.

It was over a twelve hour drive to Memphis, but she didn't have the money for a plane ticket, especially not a last minute one. Clarice wasn't sure what she would do if she actually found something. She could call Crawford and report whatever information she learned, but she herself would still be a day away. Not that he would need her to act on a lead, but she suspected he wouldn't be pleased with her leaving the state. Then again, he had told her to do whatever it took.

The drive gave her time to think, at least. She stopped for fast food three times along the way, each time quickly going in to use the bathroom and ordering a burger that she took right back to the car with her, eating as she drove.

It was just after ten o'clock when Clarice arrived at the Memphis apartment complex where Catherine Martin lived. She pulled into a parking spot near the back fence of the lot, where she could have a clear view of any comings and goings, but where it wouldn't be immediately obvious that she was sitting in her car. After getting her binoculars out of the glove compartment, she crawled into the backseat with a little effort and settled in to wait.

The parking lot was quiet, with most of the apartment complex's residents already settled in for the night. The hours slid by; a few people came home late, and two others went on midnight runs to get fast food, but there was nothing unusual about any of it. Though everyone did have a hurried, watchful air about them, getting from their cars to their doors as quickly as possible.

Still, Clarice waited. There was nothing to indicate that she was doing anything other than wasting her time, but her gut was telling her that something was going to happen. She didn't have any idea what it would be, other than that she would know it when she saw it.

Another hour later, just after two in the morning, a man walked up from the street. He didn't head for the building, but instead stopped dead in the middle of the parking lot.

Clarice's breath caught.

It was Will Graham.

Chapter 3

Will Graham was here, standing in the parking lot where Buffalo Bill had abducted Catherine Martin. Will Graham, who had been declared missing and possibly dead for years, wasn't two dozen yards away from her.

And Dr. Lecter knew he'd be here.

Clarice studied him through the binoculars. Physically, he looked well, and not that different than the pictures she'd seen of him. He was wearing a black coat, and his hair was longish and loose around his head. His eyes were closed, and he wasn't wearing glasses.

His eyes stayed closed, and Clarice realized what he was doing. He was re-imagining the crime scene in the way only he could.

She had to talk to him. That was why she was here. Surely something he could see would help save Catherine.

Clarice hesitated at the thought, the circumstances surrounding him more than giving her pause. She firmly believed in innocent until proven guilty, but she would be a fool not to have reservations about approaching him.

Yet she doubted that Dr. Lecter had sent her here to be murdered by Will Graham. She couldn't return and give an account of their meeting if she were dead. She realized in that moment that Dr. Lecter was helping her as much as using her—she would learn something about the killings, he would have news of the man who was forever on his mind.

If it saved Catherine Martin's life, that was a concession she could live with.

Clarice slipped her phone into her pants and checked her gun in her holster, then got out of the car. He didn't appear to hear her, so she left the car door slightly ajar instead of slamming it shut.

When she was about twenty feet from him, he opened his eyes.

"Mr. Graham?" she said as she approached. "My name is Clarice Starling. I'm with the FBI."

"I see." His face remained neutral and his body language passive as he inspected the temporary badge she held out. "You're a long way from Quantico," he commented, his hands still in his coat pockets. "For a trainee."

"Yes, sir. I'm here following a lead on the Buffalo Bill case. I have to say, of all the things I might have expected to see, you weren't one of them. You see, I got the tip from Dr. Lecter."

His eyebrows raised. "You've seen Hannibal?"

"Yes, sir."

“I imagine he talks about me.”

“No, not a word. Mostly to annoy Mr. Crawford and Dr. Chilton, I think.”

He didn’t respond, but simply stared at her with a considered gaze.

Clarice cleared her throat and continued. “Dr. Lecter brought up your name to me once. But he didn’t tell me you’d be here. He only said if I came, I’d see something interesting.”

“Did he?” He pressed his lips into a thin line, suddenly looking extremely cross. “I’m not interested in what Hannibal finds interesting. Hannibal Lecter destroyed my life. I don’t want to think about him anymore. I’ve gotten him out of my head, and out of my life, and I’d do anything to keep him from getting back in.”

“All right, I understand,” she said quickly, wanting to keep him cooperative. “But could you tell me where you’ve been, maybe?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“I’m sure Mr. Crawford—”

“Jack Crawford can go to Hell.” He said it matter-of-factly, without any heat behind it. “Which do you think Jack would want more—to know what became of me, or to solve this case? Because I know. And the answer is always going to be the case. If you want to work for him, you’d better learn that now.”

“*I* want to solve the case, Mr. Graham. I want to save Catherine. I’m here to find Buffalo Bill.”

“So am I.”

There was a moment of silence before he exhaled slowly and shut his eyes. He opened them on his next breath and regarded her again.

Then he held out a hand. “Call me Will.”

She was surprised, but after another beat, she shook his hand, which was warm from being in his pocket. “Clarice.”

He gave her a small smile. “So you came here to see something interesting,” he said. “Did you?”

“I saw you, well, doing what you do.”

“Nothing interesting about that unless I find something,” he said, half to her and half to himself. He moved then, looking around the parking lot as he turned in a slow circle, slipping back into his own headspace like she wasn’t even there. “And there’s not a lot to find.” Will made another rotation before he walked closer to the building and craned his neck. “No evidence left. We know he drove up and took her, but that won’t help us catch him. What can

you tell me about the abductions that hasn't been on the news?" He finally glanced in her direction.

"Not much. There have never been any witnesses, and he's always careful to take them from places that don't have cameras. There's been nothing found at the crime scenes besides a sliced shirt. None of the shirts have been torn or have blood on them; it's always a straight cut up the back, presumably after the girls are unconscious."

"No witnesses, no signs of a struggle," Will repeated, thoughtful. "That's Catherine's apartment on the corner. And her car is where she parked it, there." He pointed. "But her shopping bags and her shirt were found over there, across the lot."

He walked the distance and stood looking back at her, suddenly seeming an eerie figure under the orange security lights.

Clarice shook her head and refocused. "The bags weren't disturbed," she said. "It was like she just set them down. Even if he lured her over there, there was still no struggle."

"It's nearly impossible that she knew him, given the wide area of the kidnappings. So he was a stranger. Why would a woman approach a strange man at night? Flirtation is possible, though it's unlikely that she would perceive it as desirable, given the time and place. No, it's something else." Will dropped his hands to his sides and tilted his head slightly. "You're over there," he said in a quiet voice. "How do I get you over here?"

Clarice knew as soon as he shut his eyes that this wasn't a question she was meant to answer. Still, she tried as hard as she could in the silence that followed to think of the answer.

Over a minute passed before Will opened his eyes. "He needs help," he announced.

She started to walk towards him. "Help?"

"He pretends to be handicapped, injured, impaired in some way." Will gestured in the air as he talked. "He has a van of some sort. Maybe he's moving something, maybe he drops his tools or spills his groceries—whatever he's doing, he makes a show of it. The women approach him because they want to help, but also because they don't perceive him as a threat physically. He maneuvers them to the van somehow, and by the time they realize what's happened, it's too late."

Clarice stared at him, speechless. Seeing him work, creating the right scenario seemingly out of thin air, was just as amazing as she'd heard.

Will frowned when he looked at her. "What?"

"No wonder they called you the oracle."

He smiled, a genuinely confused look settling over his face. "What?"

"The students, they used to call you the oracle. Because of what you do. I heard two of the teachers talking once, about when you taught at the Academy. And that's what they used to call you." She paused. "I'm surprised you didn't know."

Will shrugged. “I didn’t socialize. With students or faculty.” He laughed to himself. “The oracle,” he repeated. Then he tilted his head, looking down at her. “And what do they call me now?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Will gave her a sharp grin, a look that said he knew she knew, even if she was too good to say. “They call me insane. Freddie Lounds’ opinion has become the gospel.”

Clarice was unable to stop herself from asking, “Are you insane?”

He didn’t appear bothered by her question, but he didn’t answer it, either. He merely looked at her as the silence stretched between them. She was struck by the same feeling she got when Dr. Lecter held her gaze. Then Will blinked, and the moment was broken.

“I know what kind of crazy I am,” he said, “and it’s not the kind you need to worry about.”

“All right,” she said slowly. “The thing is, your association with Dr. Lecter hasn’t exactly put you in the best light. Neither has your absence or your silence.”

Clarice expected him to either deny her implications or say something else about Dr. Lecter, but Will just looked decidedly unimpressed.

“Which would you rather do, Clarice, talk about me, or talk about Buffalo Bill?”

She knew he was deliberately refusing to account for any of his whereabouts or actions, but there was no hesitation in her answer. “Buffalo Bill.”

He nodded, more to himself than to her. Then he said, “Knowing how he abducts them still doesn’t help us much. What else can you tell me about him?”

“Well,” she started, “I have the case file in the car.”

Will was surprised, but interested. “May I see it?”

It was classified, property of the FBI. It would be illegal to give it to him without some sort of authorization. But he was a legendary profiler, and Catherine was running out of time.

“Yes,” Clarice said.

She started toward her car, measuring her pace to make sure he stayed beside her and not behind her. She thought she caught a knowing look on his face, like he realized exactly what she was doing, but it was gone just as quickly.

Once at her car, Clarice dug the file out of her bag. Will sat in the passenger seat, one foot still resting on the ground, while she stood leaning against the car’s back door, looking over his shoulder. He flipped through the pages under the illumination of the car’s dome light, and it was silent for several moments.

“Why do you think he skins them?” she finally asked.

“Because he needs skin for something,” Will said absently, studying one of the photographs.

“You’re saying he kills them *for* their skin?” Clarice said, incredulous.

“The simplest explanation is often the correct one,” he said in the same distant tone, preoccupied with reading.

“I wouldn’t call that simple.”

Will glanced back at her. “He would. He does. This isn’t about murder for him; it’s about something else.”

Clarice sighed, looking out into the night. “Dr. Lecter told me that to catch a killer, a person had to be able to enter a unique headspace. I suppose that’s what he meant. How do you *do* it?”

“It’s just the way I think.” The rote way he said it in made her imagine it was a phrase he had repeated in answer many times before.

He paused over the map marking where the girls had been taken and found.

“It’s completely random, I know,” Clarice said.

“Or desperately random. Like the elaboration of a bad liar. He has a reason he’s dumping them so far apart.”

“To keep us from finding him, I suppose.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Will flipped to the next page, suddenly moving in the seat as something caught his attention. “This was found in Hannibal’s basement?”

It was the picture of the head.

“Yes. Mr. Crawford thought it was one of Dr. Lecter’s kills and that Buffalo Bill is a copycat somehow, but Dr. Lecter said that it was a former patient of his, one he found dead and, well, kept.” She bit her lip. “Does that sound like something he would do?”

“Completely,” Will said in a flat voice. “What else did he say about it?”

“Nothing.”

He looked skeptical.

“Really,” she said. “Right after that, he told me I needed to come here.”

Will blinked, and it looked like something snapped into place in his mind. “Hannibal knew who killed his patient. He had to; he wouldn’t have bothered keeping him otherwise. And he knows that it’s relevant now.”

“I know there’s a connection. There has to be; the moth in the throat is too specific for there not to be one. But nothing else matches up.”

Will looked back at the photograph, staring at it in concentration before closing his eyes briefly.

When he opened them, he ran his fingers over the picture again. “It’s not finished,” he said. “This is the beginning of a work, an experiment of a fledgling killer.”

“Fledgling killer,” Clarice repeated, standing up straight. “That means he’s killed again. And — Now he’s Buffalo Bill. He is, isn’t he? Buffalo Bill is the one who killed Dr. Lecter’s patient.”

“Yes.” Will stood, setting the file in the seat and then straightening his coat.

“Then why wouldn’t Dr. Lecter say that?”

Will raised an eyebrow, silently calling attention to the absurdity of the question.

“Besides the fact that this is all a game to him,” she clarified, “why wouldn’t he say that?”

“He wouldn’t hand it to you because he needed you to be desperate enough to come here. Because he knew I would be here.”

Clarice couldn’t keep the disbelief out of her voice. “You’re telling me that Dr. Lecter is withholding information about a murderer just so he could find out how you’re doing?”

“Yes.” His expression was neutral, not surprised, not confused. Like he was long used to such things and wasn’t bothered by them.

“How did he even know you’d be here?”

“Because he knows me better than anyone,” Will said simply. He looked off into the distance. “I’m finally predictable to him now.”

She sighed, crossing her arms. “Do you know who Buffalo Bill is?”

“No. But Hannibal does.” He paused. “You’ll still have to figure it out; he won’t just give it to you. But you know more than you did before. You can use that.”

“And you?” Clarice asked, holding his gaze.

“I know more than I did before, too.”

“I mean, what happens now?”

Will stared down at her, his expression cool. “Now, you go back to where you came from, and I go back to where I came from.”

Clarice felt like she shouldn't just let him leave, but there were no warrants for his arrest, nothing legal that gave her any kind of authority. But she was the first person to see him in four years, and letting him fade away into the shadows again felt fundamentally wrong.

Will obviously saw this dilemma playing out across her face. "I'll make it easy for you," he said. "If you want to stop me, you're actually going to have to stop me." Then he turned around and simply walked away.

She stared at his retreating form, still torn, but she already knew that she wasn't going to do anything. Another moment, and he was around the fence and out of sight, like he'd never been there at all.

Clarice slumped against her car, going over her options. She felt like she had to do something. Finally, she called the FBI's main tip line, identifying herself and reporting that she'd seen Will Graham in Memphis.

They could put out a bulletin on him if they wanted to, but she had to get back to Baltimore to see what else she could get out of Dr. Lecter. Hopefully having intelligence on Will would give her something worthwhile to exchange for the name of Buffalo Bill.

If the drive to Memphis was long, the drive back was even longer. Clarice stopped frequently for coffee. She'd already pushed past the point of tired, and her exhaustion was almost like background noise to the task at hand.

Just past seven, her phone rang. It was Crawford.

Clarice hit the speakerphone. "Hello?"

"What the hell is going on, Starling? I wake up and I've got messages that not only has Will Graham been spotted, but that you're the one who spotted him!"

"Yes, sir. In Memphis."

"And you just let him walk away?!"

"I didn't have anything to hold him for. Should I have arrested him without cause? Or is Will Graham on a wanted list that I don't know about?"

There was a measured silence. "No," Crawford finally said, "he's not. After someone has been wrongfully imprisoned for murder, notice gets taken if things aren't done by the book. We've got to have more than speculation." He sighed. "Why were you in Memphis? And where are you now?"

"I'm still seven or eight hours out, sir. I went to Memphis on a tip from Dr. Lecter. The tip led me to Will Graham."

Crawford took a deep breath, like he was collecting himself, or perhaps preparing for the worst. "And does he have anything to do with these murders?"

“No, sir. Not that I can see.” Briefly, she relayed their conversation, with particular attention to the insights Will had had about Buffalo Bill.

Crawford listened, making few comments as she spoke. After she’d finished, he asked, “And how did he seem?”

“He was very… professional. He wouldn’t answer anything I asked about him, but was easy to talk to about profiling. He was helpful, and fairly friendly for someone who was known for being antisocial. Though talking to him was somewhat unsettling.”

“In what way?”

“It’s hard to say,” Clarice said slowly. “It wasn’t anything he did or said. He was never hostile or threatening, or even antagonistic.” She paused, searching for the right words. “He was… always in control,” she realized, hearing echoes of Dr. Chilton’s voice even as she spoke.

Nothing had happened, but she was suddenly struck with the thought that that was solely because Will hadn’t wanted anything to happen. He had accepted her presence easily enough, but their entire dialogue had only occurred because he had allowed it. It was an uncomfortable realization, and she was bothered that she had only now pinpointed it.

“Whatever Will Graham is or isn’t, he’s very good,” she said. “But Dr. Lecter knows who Buffalo Bill is. I’m headed back to Baltimore to talk to him, unless you want me on something else.”

“No. You’re right where I want you. Keep at it.”

“Yes, sir. Have there been any other developments?”

“Price identified the moth as a species that only lives in Asia. They would’ve had to have been imported. We’ve been checking Customs records and eliminating anyone that doesn’t fit the profile, but it’s slow going. Let me know the second you get something from Hannibal.”

“Yes, sir,” she said again.

Crawford hung up, and Clarice kept driving.

She arrived at the hospital late in the afternoon. Dr. Lecter was lying on his cot reading a book.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Lecter,” Clarice said. Her voice sounded as tired as she felt.

“Good afternoon,” he said, standing up and setting the book on the table with a meticulous type of precision. “Was your errand successful?”

“In a manner of speaking.” She walked closer to the glass, as did he. “I did see something interesting: Will Graham.”

She imagined that Dr. Chilton had just bolted upright in his chair as he undoubtedly listened to their conversation. Dr. Lecter, of course, had no such reaction at the name; he merely looked expectant.

“And what happened?” he asked.

Clarice had realized during the drive that this conversation had the potential to go unpleasantly, but it wasn’t until she was staring at his face, which had a genuinely emotional look behind the anticipation, that she realized how badly it could go wrong.

Dr. Lecter watched her expression change in the seconds that ticked by as she didn’t speak. He frowned, then actually began to look concerned. “Was he unwell?”

“No. Not at all. I just question how welcome my news will be.”

He tilted his head. “You question my further cooperation if I hear something that displeases me.”

She didn’t see a reason to deny it. “Yes.”

“I will not shoot the messenger, Clarice,” he said, taking another step forward. “It would hardly be tasteful.”

Clarice sighed. “We had a conversation. He didn’t have much to say about you. He said that he didn’t want to think about you anymore,” she said frankly. “That he’d gotten you out of his life and would do anything to keep you from getting back in.”

The words seemed to hang in the air after she spoke, settling in the space between them.

Dr. Lecter didn’t have an immediate visible reaction. Then the corners of his mouth slowly turned up, progressing into a pleased smile.

“You don’t seem very upset,” she ventured.

“Will once told me something similar, using nearly those exact words. He did not mean them then, though I didn’t know it at the time. I am positive he does not mean them now. They’re too significant for him to have chosen them carelessly.”

“Then what does he mean?”

Dr. Lecter’s expression was smug. “Quite the opposite, I imagine.”

Clarice crossed her arms, shaking her head. “But he didn’t even ask me to tell you that.”

“And yet he knew you would,” he said, still extraordinarily pleased.

Clarice replayed their initial conversation in her mind and suddenly felt like a fool. From the second she had spoken to him, Will had taken all his cues from her, in such a skilled manner that she hadn’t even noticed, in spite of all her training. He hadn’t said anything of

importance until she'd confirmed that Dr. Lecter had been silent about him, and then he'd composed a message that she wouldn't give a thought to repeating.

"Don't look so dismayed," Dr. Lecter said. "There's nothing disgraceful in being misled by Will. It happens to the best of us."

"Not to you. Not anymore."

"Not anymore," he agreed. "We're beyond that."

There were several ways the opposite of Will's words could be interpreted, and all of them certainly meant that he and Dr. Lecter hadn't had a falling out, which raised some disturbing questions in and of itself. But the implication that Will enjoyed Dr. Lecter's presence in his life lent credibility to the speculation that they engaged in similar activities.

Clarice repeated Will's lines again in her head, a frown creasing her brow. "And what purpose did saying any of that serve?" She couldn't find anything else hidden in the words, nothing that was worth the effort of covert communication.

"No purpose, other than to let me know that I'm in his thoughts."

"And you're pleased with that."

He smiled. "It's always nice to know we're in the thoughts of our loved ones."

"How did you know Will Graham would be there?" she asked.

"I do not know where Will has wandered with certainty, but this killer would have been too much for him to ignore."

"You said the key to finding Catherine Martin would be in Memphis. Will did provide some valuable insights, but he hardly unlocked a door. You still hold the keys to that, Doctor."

An eyebrow raised. "Do I indeed?"

"You said Catherine would die if I didn't go to Memphis. That was misleading."

"It was a truth, in its own way," he said, watching her through the glass. "I would not have assisted you had I not stood to receive anything in return."

Clarice abruptly realized that he was referring to more than just their last exchange. "That's why you helped me to begin with," she said. "You knew Will Graham would be going to the scenes of the abductions. You knew it was only a matter of time before the next girl would be taken and you could get me there. You even spoke about him so I'd be more interested when I saw him."

"Guilty as charged." He looked extremely self-satisfied, and not at all bothered that he had manipulated a murder investigation and wasted hours of resources simply to tell someone 'hello.' And Will had said 'hello' back, in so many words. For the second time that day,

Clarice found herself wondering not what had happened to Will Graham, but what Will Graham could make happen.

“Will has always known where you were,” she said. “It would have been easy to contact you himself.”

“Do you imagine the FBI would be obliging with such a correspondence?”

“No,” Clarice admitted.

“And there you have it. If I hadn’t initiated contact, it would not have occurred.”

She took a few steps to the side, before moving back, resisting the urge to start pacing. “You haven’t said a word about Will since you got here, Dr. Lecter, let alone confirm that he was still living.”

“And how could I confirm it in good conscience?” he asked, a smirk on his face. “What do I know for certain from this room?”

“A great deal, apparently.” Clarice didn’t believe for a second that he doubted Will’s survival. “And now you’ve rather shown your hand.”

“Contacting Will may have been impulsive,” Dr. Lecter said, sounding strangely truthful. “But I found I could not let the opportunity pass. My decision today would perhaps be different from my decision yesterday, but we can only act with the information we have at any given time. It brings me great pleasure to know that he’s doing well, especially when I entertained no hope of conversing with him again.”

“All right. And why explain any of this to me?”

“Some recent news has put me in a most excellent mood, and your intelligence of Will has gladdened me further,” he said cheerfully. “Now, tell me of his insights on this case.”

Clarice sensed that he was done talking about Will, and that any further attempts to clarify their relationship would be shut down. She decided that was fine for now; there would be time for that conversation after Catherine was found. Catherine was the priority, not Will.

“You know who Buffalo Bill is,” she started. “He’s the man who killed your patient.”

“Yes. I met him just once; he was referred to me for treatment.”

“Will you tell me his name?”

“No.” His answer was simple and final.

“Catherine Martin is going to die.” Even as she said it, she knew that he couldn’t care less about Catherine Martin. But she couldn’t stop the words from coming out.

“She will only die if you fail to catch him.”

Clarice tried a different approach. “Then tell me how.”

Dr. Lecter folded his hands behind his back, giving her an appraising gaze. “What have you learned?”

“He was a fledgling killer when he did this to your patient. He’s gotten better since then. He’s figured out what he needs from killing. All his recent kills have been identical. The moth is the only thing that links your patient to them.”

He nodded. “The significance of the moth is change. Caterpillar into chrysalis, and from thence into beauty. His initial kill was his first poor effort at transformation.”

“Transforming them, or transforming himself by proxy?”

Dr. Lecter just smiled.

“Did he skin the body?” she pressed.

“No. Merely decorated it.”

Clarice tried to parse out what he meant. There wasn’t anything else remarkable about the head besides the moth and— “The makeup? That wasn’t something your patient wore?”

“Not in life, and not by his own hand. He became a canvas on which to paint another’s aspirations.”

“Aspirations,” she repeated. An idea sparked in the back of her mind. “Is that what you meant by transformation?” Clarice shook her head. “There’s no correlation between trans people and violence.”

“Clever girl,” he said, approval in his voice. “Your killer is not really trans, though he tries to be. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had tried and failed. He’s tried to be a lot of things, I imagine.”

“What do you mean by failed?” Clarice asked. “There’s not a rule book to being trans.”

“His goal would have been nothing short of a full physical transformation.”

“You mean he would have applied for sex reassignment surgery,” she said, the realization crystallizing in her mind, quickly followed by what it meant. There would be a hospital with records of him, a way to trace him. “And he would have been denied.”

Dr. Lecter nodded. “He would have been rejected for as a candidate for psychological disturbances, possibly a history of violence. His pathology is more savage than anything he himself can grasp. He hates his own identity, and is forever trying to find ways to escape his self-loathing. If he had continued his therapy, perhaps I could have helped him become comfortable in his own skin.”

Dr. Lecter had destroyed all his patient files, but there were sources that reported that murder was often what he circuitously prescribed for treatment and personal growth.

“And would Buffalo Bill have been better after such treatment, Doctor?” she asked wryly.

“That all depends upon your definition of the word,” he said, his mouth quirking up in amusement. Then he licked his lips, and said altogether too casually, “I didn’t learn until after you left yesterday that Catherine Martin was the daughter of a senator. Even I could not have predicted the providence of Buffalo Bill stumbling across such a victim.”

Clarice didn’t immediately respond, trying to figure out what he was getting at. “And?” she finally asked.

“That makes the stakes all the more dire, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t care that Catherine Martin is related to a senator, Dr. Lecter. I would do my job with just as much dedication if she weren’t.”

“Of course you would,” he agreed easily. “But the clock continues to tick, each second drawing her closer to her demise.”

Clarice bit her lip. Patient records were going to take time, even if Crawford used all his authority to get them rushed. They would find him, but not in time to save Catherine. “Tell me how to find him,” she repeated. “Please.”

“You already have everything you need in the file,” he said, staring down at her. “And I have every confidence that you will do so without further assistance.”

Clarice held his gaze for a long as she could, hoping some other truth would fall from his lips, before she realized that nothing else would be said.

Trying not to feel as defeated as she felt, she simply said, “Thank you, Dr. Lecter.”

With that, she turned around and walked toward the door.

His voice called after her. “Would you please tell Barney that I would like to use one of my phone calls?”

Clarice looked over her shoulder. Dr. Lecter was standing in the center of his cell, hands at his sides and looking as if he didn’t have a care in the world, just like the first time she’d seen him.

“Yes, of course,” she murmured, before continuing down the hall.

She told Barney about the phone call, before asking him if he could sneak her out the back. She’d been awake for almost thirty-six hours, and was in no mood to be ensnared into a conversation with Dr. Chilton. If he wanted to talk about Will Graham, he could go visit Dr. Lecter.

Barney obliged her, and soon Clarice was back in her car. She called Crawford and told him they needed to check records at hospitals that performed sex reassignment surgery, looking for rejections that fit their profile.

Then she was back on the highway, only an hour away from falling into her bed and getting some much needed sleep.

Chapter 4

Clarice slept until her phone rang at 3:47 a.m. She blearily looked at the screen, and seeing that it was Crawford, answered the call.

“Hello?” she slurred, sleep still fogging her mind.

Crawford said without preamble, “Hannibal Lecter escaped.”

“What?” Clarice exclaimed, jerking upright in bed. “When? How?” She was suddenly wide awake.

“Yesterday, he placed a call to Freddie Lounds, saying that he knew the identity of Buffalo Bill, but that he would only give the name to Senator Martin, and only in person. Ms. Lounds posted the story on her site, along with a recording of Hannibal making his offer. The senator’s people picked it up pretty fast. Given that her daughter has one day left to live, she was understandably desperate. But she refused to leave Memphis, so she called in some favors to have Hannibal flown in. She’s got some heavy-hitters from Justice on her side, and against my strong recommendations, Hannibal was taken to Memphis by plane.”

Clarice put a hand to her head, realizing that Dr. Lecter had been planning to leverage Buffalo Bill’s name ever since he’d learned Catherine was a senator’s daughter. It was worth more now than it had been a day and a half ago, worth more to a distraught parent who had power to wield.

“He maneuvered himself into being transported,” she said, speaking her thoughts aloud. “But that was still a long shot, as far as a chance to escape goes. Was the van intercepted?”

“No. He did this all on his own. Hannibal made it to Memphis and was never removed from the plane. He spoke briefly to the senator, giving a physical description of Buffalo Bill. We also got a name, Louis Friend, but so far that hasn’t turned up anything. Hannibal could have been lying about all of it, since the whole thing was a gambit to get himself in a different location.”

“I’m surprised Dr. Chilton allowed him to be moved. He didn’t seem inclined to do anything that was Dr. Lecter’s idea.”

“Chilton is a pompous ass,” Crawford said, anger making him sharp. “He will always do what’s most advantageous to him. I’m sure he could hardly contain himself at the prospect of doing a favor for all the important people suddenly knocking at his door, if he could ensure that they owed him one in return. I told him taking Hannibal Lecter anywhere was insanity; he told me that Hannibal might have been lost on my watch and Dr. Bloom’s watch, but that he wouldn’t be lost on *his*.”

Crawford paused, taking a breath, and then launched into a straight recitation of facts, in a flat voice that she had often heard at the Academy when summarizing crimes. “After talking to Hannibal, the senator left the hangar with her entourage to make a statement to the press.

Chilton went with her, and the pilot had disembarked. There were two officers left on board, and Hannibal was in a cage wearing a straightjacket and his mask. It was at this point that he very convincingly faked a seizure. They removed him from the cage to keep him from banging his head against the bars, though one officer was still extremely cautious and kept his gun trained on Hannibal throughout. It was then noticed that Hannibal wasn't breathing. After three minutes without respiration, they called an ambulance and took off the straightjacket to attempt chest compressions. That's when Hannibal struck, apparently having been holding his breath. We have video of this because the plane was wired with a camera. After killing the officers, Hannibal smashed it with a baton. Two more officers must have entered the plane after that, because there were four bodies total."

Clarice let out the breath she'd been holding. "And no one saw him leave? With all the senator's personnel and the media coverage outside?"

Crawford's tone was grave. "When the scene was first discovered, one of the officers was presumed alive, and he was immediately put on board the ambulance. Later during the search for Hannibal, that officer's body was discovered stripped of his uniform and stuffed into the space where the landing gear recedes." There was a grim pause. "Hannibal had cut off his face. He used it as a mask to get himself loaded onto the ambulance and away from any search perimeter. The ambulance was later discovered with the crew dead inside. There's been no sign of Hannibal Lecter since."

Clarice was speechless. The darkness of her room seemed like a void around her. She didn't have any illusions about what Dr. Lecter was or what he had done, but there was something profoundly unsettling about hearing things that only happened a few hours ago, compared to reading about acts committed years ago.

There truly wasn't a word for what he was, and now he was free from all restraint once again.

"I don't know what to say, sir."

"It's a lot to take in," he said. "But we don't have time to waste. Obviously the hunt for Hannibal Lecter is going to be a main priority. But I still want you on Buffalo Bill. You've got the file, and you've got what Hannibal and—" he faltered over the next name "—Will told you. And we have Hannibal's description: around thirty-five, 5'10", one hundred and eighty pounds, blond hair. There has to be something in there that we can use."

"Yes, sir."

"Hannibal's escape is already all over the news channels and the Internet. But I wanted you to hear it from me. I never thought this would happen. I never should have put you in his path. It was reckless of me."

Clarice realized what he was getting at. It wasn't inconceivable that Dr. Lecter would find it amusing to kill those who had come to study him during his incarceration.

"With all due respect, sir, if Dr. Lecter comes here to kill anyone, it's going to be you."

“Eventually, yes,” he said, sounding far too familiar with being a target of a serial killer. “But he could use you to get at me. He’s done it before.”

“Yes. I know.”

“Just be on your guard, Starling.”

Clarice didn’t flatter herself that she was different from any of Dr. Lecter’s victims. She wasn’t an exception, wasn’t special or important to him; she was meaningless, a pawn in the game. But that game hadn’t been against her, or against Crawford. It had been Dr. Lecter’s own game against the world, and she had played by his rules. Her gut told her that he wouldn’t come after her, that he would consider it a rude ending to their conversation. Clarice felt strangely calm, despite her horror of only a few moments ago.

But she didn’t say any of that to Crawford, aware of how baseless it sounded.

“I do have one further thought, sir, though it’s probably something you’ve already considered.”

“What’s that?”

“Dr. Lecter’s not going to come after you, or me, or anyone immediately. The first thing he’s going to do is find Will Graham.”

Clarice understandably couldn’t go back to sleep after Crawford’s phone call. After lying in bed far too long and trying, she got up and began reading the Buffalo Bill file again. She started out at her desk, but ended up in the floor, sitting cross-legged with the papers spread out all around her.

She knew there was something here; there had to be. Dr. Lecter had said she had everything she needed to find Buffalo Bill. What was she missing? She pored over the pages about the victims, the profile of Buffalo Bill, and her notes from her conversations with Dr. Lecter, but kept coming up blank.

It was only when her morning alarm went off that Clarice realized how long she had been working. The papers had all started to look the same, and no matter how long she stared at them, nothing new occurred to her. She stood up with a sigh, stretching her legs and pacing on the other side of the room.

Her eyes fell to the map that she had set to one side, the map marking the sites of the abductions of the girls and the locations of the bodies. Sighing again, she picked it up, staring at it as she paced.

Everything about the spots was random, like throwing darts with your eyes closed. It was utterly random. So random that that was the point, maybe.

“Desperately random,” she said thoughtfully, repeating Will’s words to herself. “Like the elaboration of a bad liar.”

What did that *mean*? She wasn't sure Will had known what it meant, only that he had seen something, recognized that something was out of place.

What was there to see, though, when there was no pattern? Even the order the girls had been discovered in was random, the first girl taken having been the third girl found. After her, Buffalo Bill had gotten lazy, not weighting any of the others down.

Clarice furrowed her brow in thought. There was something here, if she could just grasp what it was— Random, it was too random, why would he do it so randomly? To keep from getting caught was the obvious answer, but that didn't explain the girls being found out of order. There was something more—something else—

"It's not random," she gasped.

Clarice felt a rush wash over her, even though all she had done was stare at papers feeling like she was going mad, until that one shining moment when it had all clicked.

She called Crawford. It was still early, but she knew that with the night's events, he was probably already in his office.

"Crawford," he answered.

"It's not random," Clarice blurted. "Buffalo Bill takes the girls, but it's not random. It is *now* but it wasn't when he started."

"There's no pattern, Starling. We've looked, and we've run it through every computer program we have."

"No, there's no pattern, but it's not random," she exclaimed. "He's taking them from so many different places because he doesn't want us to see. He didn't get lazy after the first girl—she was the only one he didn't want found. He knew her; he had to. He weighted her down so no one would connect them. The others, he didn't care about, because there was no connection to start with. But her, Frederica Bimmel from Belvedere, Ohio, he knew her."

For a long moment, Crawford didn't say anything. Then, "All right. It sounds like you've got something here. I want you to go to Ohio. Talk to her family, friends, neighbors, see if there's anything you can find. We'll start getting names soon, and I want someone on the ground there to make connections."

"Me, sir?"

"Someone's got to do it," Crawford said, matter-of-fact. "And you might have just made the break in this case, you know."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much."

"Just keep it up. And Starling? We'll get you a plane ticket this time."

Clarice's flight arrived in Pittsburgh after noon.

By the time she rented a car and made it to Belvedere, it was nearly an hour and a half later. At the Bimmel house, she spoke to Frederica's father, asking him a few questions that he didn't have any new answers to. He seemed apologetic that he didn't have anything else to say that would help, but was so obviously broken by what had happened that he was just going through the motions of daily life.

He agreed without objection to let her have a look around Frederica's room, adding that her bedroom was just how she had left it. Clarice thanked him and started up the stairs.

It was the room of a woman who was still straddling the line between childhood and adulthood. There were sentimental objects like animal figurines and a dollhouse mixed in with the books and makeup of a young woman. There were photos with friends on the walls and nightstand, and the end of the bed still had a dress thrown haphazardly over it.

Clarice walked around, casually inspecting everything, looking for anything that would point to Frederica having an acquaintance that was unknown to her parents. Nothing jumped out at her.

In one corner of the room was a sewing machine and a dressmaker's dummy. It was near the closet, and Clarice opened the doors. Inside there were dresses, several of them being in various states of completion. One of them had material pinned on the back in two large diamond shapes for an alteration.

Everything suddenly snapped into place in one brilliant, horrible moment.

"He needs skin for something."

"Perhaps I could have helped him become comfortable in his own skin."

Buffalo Bill was making himself a woman suit out of real women, his final effort at transformation.

Clarice immediately called Crawford on her phone, starting right in with what she'd found. "He's making a suit out of the skin. He can sew; he's skilled. He's a tailor, or a dressmaker, maybe a leather worker—"

"We know who he is," Crawford cut her off. "And where he is. A team is already on its way."

"How? Where?"

"Calumet City, edge of Chicago. We got some names from Johns Hopkins. We cross-referenced them with our list from Customs. One of them matched a Customs form two years ago about a carton of live caterpillars from Surinam, sent to a Jame Gumb. Hannibal's physical description was accurate, though he lied about the name. The team should be at the house in half an hour."

She couldn't help the smile that spread over her face. "That's wonderful news, sir."

“It is. Now, I’m about to get on a plane to head there myself. But I still need you to link Gumb to the Bimmel girl. We want to be sure we can get him on murder, not just kidnapping. See what else you can dig up in Belvedere.”

Clarice spoke to one of Frederica’s friends next, asking her if there had been a man in Frederica’s life, even peripherally. Stacy was adamant that if Frederica had had a guy in her life, then she would have known about it. All Frederica had been interested in was sewing. They had even worked together doing alterations for the town seamstress, Mrs. Lippman.

Clarice got the address from her. She was beginning to think that trying to get a connection to Gumb was futile. Either they had known each other secretly at some point, or he had simply coveted her from afar.

Mrs. Lippman’s house was at the edge of town, in an area where the houses began to get fewer and far between. Clarice parked the car and walked to the door.

She knocked. The door was opened by a man, only wide enough for her to see his face.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “Sorry to bother you. I’m looking for Mrs. Lippman’s family.”

“The Lippmans don’t live here anymore,” he said, starting to shut the door.

Clarice put her hand out. “Please, I really need to speak with you. I’m investigating the death of Frederica Bimmel. Your name is?”

“Jack Gordon.”

“Mr. Gordon, Frederica used to work for Mrs. Lippman. Did you know her?”

“Don’t think so. No. No, I read about her in the newspaper, though. You know, Mrs. Lippman had a son. Maybe he could help you. I got his card in here somewhere, if you wanna come in while I look for it.”

“May I?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.” He opened the door wider, walking into the house himself as she entered. “You think you’re close to catching somebody?” he said from the other side of the room.

“We may be,” Clarice said. The interior of the house was dark and dirty, and cluttered with neglect. “Did you take over this place after Mrs. Lippman died?”

“Uh-huh, bought the house two years ago.”

Clarice looked around carefully as his back was turned. There were sewing implements scattered around, large spools of machine thread and bolts of material. All of them looked long-disused; this was certainly no longer a place of business.

“Did Mrs. Lippman leave any account books? Employee records? Tax forms?”

“No, nothing like that,” he said, halfheartedly digging through a stack of papers. “Has the FBI learned something?” he pressed. “I mean, you got like a description, fingerprints, anything like that?”

“No,” she said, his interest in the case putting her further on guard. He fit Dr. Lecter’s description. “No, we don’t.”

At that moment, a large moth flew across the living room, landing on one of the spools of thread.

Clarice’s heart skipped a beat, and she knew.

“Here’s that number,” he said.

“Very good, Mr. Gordon.” She tried to keep her voice from changing, but she could hear the waver in it herself.

Gumb started laughing in that moment, a twisted, careless thing that sent a shiver down her spine.

Clarice brought her gun up. “Freeze! Put your hands over your head. Turn around!”

He slowly did so, still laughing, the cards falling from his hands.

“Put your hands in the back!” she shouted. “And stop moving!”

Gumb darted through the doorway behind him in one lithe movement. Clarice ran after him into the kitchen, and saw a thrown open door that led to the basement. Checking around the corners with her gun in front of her, she slowly walked through. Her heart was pounding as she went down the stairs, but she knew that Catherine was down here somewhere. If she didn’t catch Gumb, he would kill her now that he’d been made.

The basement room was small and dingy, but there was another doorway. Kicking it open and holding her gun out, she found another room beyond, but no sign of Gumb. These walls were dank and brick, unpainted, and there was a hallway leading to rooms beyond. The basement was larger than the floor plan above it, perhaps even connecting to the building on the other side of the property. The only illumination was the occasional bare light bulb.

Clarice started down the hall. She could hear the tinny sound of a stereo playing somewhere, and a moment later, there was the sound of an echoing female voice. She flung open the next door, finding herself in a room full of dress dummies and drapes of material. The voice was louder.

There was still no trace of Gumb. Clarice focused on her surroundings, keeping her back to something guarded as she continued forward. Another doorway led her to a cavernous room with an old well in the center.

A voice drifted up from it. “Hello? Is someone there? I’m down here!”

“Catherine Martin?” Clarice yelled.

“Yes!”

“FBI! You’re safe!” Clarice spun around once more, checking the room.

“Safe, my ass! Get me outta here!”

“You’re going to be all right. Where is he?”

“How the hell should I know?!” she wailed. “Please, just get me outta here!”

Satisfied that Gumb wasn’t near, Clarice leaned over the well, seeing the vague outline of a face below. “Catherine, I’m going to get you out, but right now I have to leave this room. I will be back, I swear to you. But right now I have to find him.” She stood.

“No! Don’t you leave me here! I’ve gotta get outta here! Please!” she cried, her words devolving into a shriek. “Don’t go! Please!”

Clarice felt for her, couldn’t imagine what she had been through, but the only way to make sure Catherine was safe was to get Gumb.

There was another door on the opposite side of the room, and Clarice kicked it open, the wails of Catherine fading behind her. There were moths flying through the air and more tables covered with junk, but nothing else.

As she progressed into the next room, the electricity was cut, and her surroundings descended into complete and total black.

Sheer and absolute terror gripped her. Clarice stumbled over something, finding herself on the ground. Quickly, she dug her phone out of her pocket, turning on the flashlight. She was panicking as she spun in a circle, looking above her for Gumb.

He wasn’t in the room with her, but the light on her phone did little to illuminate the twisting corners or the many doorways. He could be steps away, hidden behind a wall, ready to strike at her when he was in her blind spot.

The only sound she could hear was her own heavy breathing.

Clarice shakily stood. She adjusted her grip on her gun, forced to hold it in one hand so she could hold her phone in the other. The light was a relief, but she wasn’t used to firing this way. Even the stances for holding a flashlight and a gun together didn’t work with the awkwardness of a phone.

Her heart was pounding as she walked through the open doorway of the next room, only able to see what it contained as the beam of light penetrated the darkness and left darkness behind it in turn. Every time she moved the beam, she expected it to land on Gumb, even as she expected him to be in the darkness behind her. She tried to keep a wall at her back as she advanced into yet another room, but there were three doorways in this one, hollow arches that yawned into the blackness beyond. Her trek across the room was a panicked, perpetual spinning, as she tried to keep an eye on all three entrances.

Just as she had made it across the room and was about to advance through one of the archways, there was a *click* from behind her.

Clarice spun, her phone slipping from her fingers as she instinctively brought her left hand to meet her right, emptying her clip into the figure that she only barely glimpsed in the falling light.

He went down, and she fumbled with shaking hands that could barely grasp the bullets to reload her gun, the light from her phone pointing blankly at the ceiling. Gun loaded, Clarice grabbed her phone, aiming its beam at where Gumb lay on the floor, ready to shoot him again if necessary.

But he only gurgled, sputtering up blood before he went still. A pair of night vision goggles was on his head, and a gun had dropped beside him.

Clarice stood still for a few moments, her heart still racing. She felt like she could barely breathe.

She needed to call Crawford, as well as local law enforcement so they could get Catherine out. Her hand was still trembling as she unlocked her phone, only to find that there was no signal in the basement. Holding it out in front of her, she gingerly stepped around Gumb's body and began to navigate the labyrinthine rooms that led back to the main house. She didn't have any intention of talking to Catherine again and leaving her. She would find her way upstairs, make the call, see if she could either get the power on or find a flashlight, and then go back and sit at the top of the well with Catherine until help arrived.

Clarice managed to navigate her way back to the door that led into the undeveloped basement. The faint daylight spilling out from it was a welcome sight.

She put her gun in her holster and turned off the phone flashlight, quickly ascending the stairs and moving through the kitchen in an effort to get as far away from the basement as possible. When she entered the living room, she stopped dead.

Will Graham was sitting on the sofa.

"Why are you here?" she blurted. Her panic from her ordeal with Gumb hadn't worn off yet, and seeing Will so obviously out of place did nothing to quell that panic.

"Hannibal told me Jame Gumb's name," he said, not answering her question. "I figured the rest of it out myself. I see you did, too."

"You've seen Dr. Lecter?"

Will stood, adjusting his coat. "I haven't seen Hannibal since he pushed me off a bridge."

Clarice frowned, her curiosity getting the better of her. Something about that was familiar, even if she couldn't make the circumstances add up. "Dr. Lecter slit a man's throat and threw him off a bridge the night he was captured."

Will huffed, a half-laugh. “He didn’t slit my throat. Just gave me a hell of a bruise.” He seemed more amused than angered about it.

“You don’t seem very upset,” she finally said.

“It wasn’t a tall bridge.” He said it with a straight face, but there was something darkly humorous in his eyes.

Will was only a few feet away from her, and Clarice resisted the urge to take a step back. He hadn’t done anything, but she had more than enough reasons not to trust him. Her heart was pounding again, and she knew she had to keep control of her body language.

Will was already in control; she didn’t need to lose what little control she had.

Clarice pressed her lips together. “Where is Dr. Lecter?”

“Loose, so I hear,” Will said, still perfectly at ease.

There was something so wrong with all of this. Clarice didn’t think that Will had any association with Gumb, but everything about his appearance here was wrong. It was uncomfortable how comfortable he was, how unfazed he was by anything.

“How did Dr. Lecter contact you?” she asked, for lack of her mind supplying anything else to say.

Will gave her a wry look. “He still has my number.” Then he pointedly glanced down at the phone in her hand. “Have you called them yet?”

She should have said yes. She should have done anything but let her breath get caught in her throat in hesitation.

One corner of his mouth turned up as he read the answer on her face. “You haven’t. That makes things simpler.”

Clarice’s fear spiked. “Why are you here?” she repeated.

“To get Buffalo Bill.” Will tilted his head. “Hannibal was curious if you would get him. I decided I was curious, too. I came for Buffalo Bill myself, but I’m adaptable.”

Clarice shook her head, her breathing catching. “I don’t understand.”

“I had already found the house,” he said, his voice even. “I was watching when you went inside.”

It took her a moment to grasp the meaning of his words. When she did, she felt a new sort of horror. “You knew who he was, what he was,” Clarice said, her voice shaking but growing in volume, the terror of what she had experienced mixing with rage that he had stood by and let it happen. “You saw me go in and you let me! You saw me not come out and you didn’t help me!”

Will stared down at her, indifferent. “I didn’t help him, either.” His expression was distant, and his eyes were completely cold.

Clarice reached for her gun, but Will was faster. He grabbed her hand, wrestling it away from her holster as he pushed her into the wall.

She fought back viciously, but he manhandled her with ease, pulling a rag from his coat pocket and pushing it firmly over her mouth and nose. Clarice could smell the chemicals, and even as she struggled, her vision began to swim.

Will looked at her calmly through the haze. “You succeeded,” he said. “If Hannibal were here, he’d congratulate you.”

Then everything went black.

Clarice came to slowly.

Her head was foggy, and it took her a minute to remember where she was and what had happened.

Buffalo Bill. Will Graham.

Clarice sat up, realizing that she was still in Gumb’s living room. She was alone.

She remembered the altercation with Will. No, not altercation. Will had attacked her and drugged her.

And had then, in complete contradiction, placed her to rest on the sofa and not done anything to her. She wasn’t even tied up. Her gun was in her holster and her phone was across the room on the floor, exactly where it had fallen from her hand.

Clarice slowly stood and, finding her footing, went to pick up her phone. Hours had passed.

Will was gone, she could feel it. Whatever he had come here to do, he’d already done it.

She immediately ran down the stairs to the basement, far more quickly than her spinning head agreed with. It made no sense for Will to come here for Buffalo Bill and then to hurt Catherine, but she was suddenly, desperately afraid that she herself was the only one alive in the empty house.

“Catherine!” she yelled as she entered the basement. “Catherine!”

Relief flooded her as she heard the distant wail of, “Get me outta here!”

“I’m calling the police right now!” Clarice called back. “He’s dead! You’re safe!”

Belatedly, she realized that the lights in the basement were back on. Will must have found the breaker box. Clarice started to go back up the stairs so she could call Crawford, but a new

sound caught her ears.

It was a faint whirring, like the sound of a machine.

Clarice drew her gun and cautiously started down the corridor. The sound grew louder as she approached. A doorway stood open, dim light spilling from it. Clarice saw that it was the room with the dress dummies as she drew closer.

She rounded the doorframe with her gun in front of her. There was a figure seated at the droning sewing machine, backlit from the bright lamp in front of it.

“Stop what you’re doing and put your hands where I can see them!” she ordered.

When nothing happened, she repeated the command louder, cocking her gun and moving further into the room.

Clarice stopped dead in her tracks when she got a good look at what was actually sitting at the machine. Her gun fell from her grasp in shock, and she pressed both hands to her mouth as she desperately tried not to gag.

After managing to keep herself from vomiting from willpower alone, Clarice bent to retrieve her gun and then hesitantly approached the sewing machine. There was something so macabre about the scene that it was impossible to look away.

A human body was seated in the chair, but it was nothing but muscle and blood and gristle, the skin having been entirely removed. A rock was on the pedal of the machine, keeping it whirring in a parody of actual work. And the work that the corpse labored over was a complete human skin.

Clarice nearly retched again as she recognized Gumb’s face, flattened and hollow from being removed. The skin of his torso was a patchwork, and it took her a moment to realize that pieces of his incomplete woman suit had been sewn directly onto it.

He sat working on himself, free of his ill-fitting skin while at the same time made one with his means of transformation.

The spectacle was gruesome, barbaric, and undoubtedly the most horrific thing she had ever seen.

And it was the work of Will Graham.

Chapter 5

The afternoon that followed was organized chaos.

Clarice called Crawford first, but was unsurprised when the call went to voicemail. She left a message explaining the bare facts as quickly as she could. Then she called 911, identifying herself and requesting emergency services with the equipment to get Catherine out of the well.

She wouldn't have been surprised if every emergency vehicle in the county had responded, because that's certainly what it looked like. Catherine was removed from the well quickly by the firemen and driven off in one of the ambulances, leaving many policeman, and at least two detectives to deal with.

Clarice was well aware that jurisdictional conflicts were going to come into play, as well as the fact that she didn't have any real authority on behalf of the FBI. Still, she approached the man in charge, who was looking askance at Gumb's body.

"Starling, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." She nodded. "I'd like to wait to process the scene until we get our own team here. Or at least until you've spoken to Director Crawford. His flight should be on the ground any minute now." He would be in Chicago, but he could give orders from there just as well.

"I don't know if you know how this usually works—" he started.

"I do, sir. But this isn't a usual circumstance. This could be related to a serial killer the FBI is interested in."

"Could this have been done by Hannibal Lecter?" He suddenly looked reluctant.

"I can't comment on that." She hadn't meant Dr. Lecter, but his name was all over the news, and if the assumption bought time for Crawford to get things straightened out, she would use it.

The detective was unenthusiastic for any of his people to get into a case that might involve Dr. Lecter, and he agreed to hold off on further action until he spoke to Crawford.

Clarice got a call from Crawford herself soon enough. He was on the ground in Chicago, already waiting on a flight to Pittsburg. He'd spoken to the Chief of Police in Belvedere, and an FBI forensic team was already on its way. Clarice went into more detail about what had happened in the time before his flight boarded, including Will's appearance.

Crawford himself arrived at the house a few hours later. Clarice had been representing the FBI until he had gotten there, and the local police had set up a perimeter to keep the curious away. By that time, Catherine's rescue was national news.

Once in the basement, Crawford grimly surveyed the body, which had been untouched, save for the industrial lights that had been set up around it. It looked even more disturbing under the stark illumination.

“Have you ever seen anything like this, sir?”

“Yes,” he said, grave. Then, “All I heard whispered on the way in here was Hannibal Lecter. Do you think there’s any possibility that he did this?”

Clarice had been unconscious, so there wasn’t a way to prove that Dr. Lecter hadn’t been there, but she doubted it. “Will came here for a reason,” she said. “And it wasn’t to clear the way for Dr. Lecter.”

Crawford nodded. “Well, we’ll see if forensics turns up anything.” He didn’t sound particularly hopeful. Then he looked at her carefully. “You did good, Starling. Very good indeed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Oh, don’t thank me yet. You’re going to have a ton of paperwork to fill out.”

That turned out to be true enough. She gave an initial statement that night, but the next day was filled with depositions and forms, as well as getting a hands on view of how a crime scene was processed, following Crawford around as he directed the scene.

She was on her feet for fourteen hours, barely having time to eat lunch. At the end of an incredibly long day, Clarice went by herself to a mom-and-pop diner on the highway, grateful to have a home cooked meal and a little peace.

Clarice left the diner only when it closed, and was the last one out of the restaurant.

She was glancing down at the unfamiliar keychain of the rental car, looking for the button that unlocked it, when she was grabbed from behind.

There was an arm around her waist, a rag over her face, and a familiar accented voice in her ear.

“Good evening, Clarice.”

Clarice came back to her senses slowly, for the second time in so many days. It wasn’t any more pleasant this time around, and she thought she could quite happily go the rest of her life without experiencing the sensation again.

She wasn’t alone this time, though, and she heard the sound of male voices before she could discern the words.

Blearily, she forced her eyes open, already knowing who she was going to find, yet at the same time hoping she was wrong.

She wasn't. Dr. Lecter was seated at the table across from her.

When she'd opened her eyes, the conversation had stopped, and now Dr. Lecter was looking at her with interest.

She'd been so stupid to think he wouldn't come for her. There was no predicting him, and she was an idiot for believing she had even an inkling about the way he viewed the world.

"Crawford was right," she mumbled.

"Jack is almost never right, and I very much doubt he's correct in this instance."

There was a snort of amusement from behind him, and Clarice saw Will moving about the room. He and Dr. Lecter had found each other, then, in the day and a half since she had seen Will. The room was a motel room, though it was much shabbier than the motel that she and the other federal employees were staying at. She couldn't imagine Dr. Lecter voluntarily staying here, so either he was here by necessity, or he was here because Will was. She could see an open suitcase on one bed, and slept-in sheets on the other.

Only when Clarice tried to move did she realize that she couldn't.

"I've administered a paralytic compound that targets selective muscle groups," Dr. Lecter said. He folded his hands on the table. "If you were able, you would be obligated to try to arrest me, and I would find it necessary to stop you. I've spared you that obligation."

It took her a moment to work out that drugging her so they didn't have a physical confrontation was Dr. Lecter's version of being *nice*. Unnerving as that was, his phrasing somewhat indicated that he didn't have further plans for her. On the other hand, drugging had been a prelude to other things with several of his past victims.

Will spoke, obviously seeing her thoughts. "He's not going to kill you," he said, sounding almost bored. He pulled out the other chair, taking a seat next to Dr. Lecter. The move brought him out of the shadows and into the light cast by the single overhead fixture above the table. "I wouldn't have let him, anyway."

"I have no reason to kill her." Dr. Lecter said easily. "Nor desire to do so."

Despite the fact that she couldn't move, her head had fully cleared, and Clarice felt a strange sort of calm come over her. Either they were lying, and they were going to kill her at the end of this no matter what, or they were telling the truth, and they weren't going to kill her (unless she did something incredibly stupid like be outright rude to Dr. Lecter).

"All the same," Dr. Lecter addressed her, "I would not attempt to draw attention to us, if I were you. Something regrettable would occur."

"I understand," Clarice said. Even if she screamed, it would accomplish nothing besides getting herself and most likely others hurt, and Dr. Lecter and Will would still be gone before the police arrived.

Her eyes flicked to the wall next to her, to the window with closed curtains. She wondered if there was normal life happening beyond it, while she sat here with a confirmed serial killer and a possible serial killer. The motel room's layout was small and standard, with the table at the front of the room only feet from the door. She was seated in a ratty corner chair that had been pulled up for her use, because it was the only one with a high enough back to support her limp neck, she realized.

It chilled her to think about Dr. Lecter bringing her here unconscious, arranging her where he liked and waiting for her to wake up. At the same time, she was certain that he had done exactly that and nothing more; he was a monster of a particular sort.

"Why am I here, Dr. Lecter?" she asked.

"We never got to finish our conversation."

Clarice needed a moment to figure out what he was talking about; then she realized he meant the conversation about her, the one she had promised to conclude after she had caught Buffalo Bill. "You abducted me to finish a conversation?"

"Yes," he said simply, making it sound like a perfectly reasonable course of action.

There was another amused noise from Will.

Dr. Lecter smiled at him, looking, for lack of a better phrase, pleased as punch.

Will just shook his head slightly, the corners of his mouth curling up.

Clarice noticed several things as she watched them. Will was sitting at the table but was unengaged, leaning back in his chair, while Dr. Lecter sat upright in a posture of attention. Will wasn't interested in her; this was clearly Dr. Lecter's show. At the same time, Will wasn't annoyed or exasperated at having her there. If anything, he seemed indulgent.

She focused on Will. If she was here for a conversation, she might as well indulge herself as much as Dr. Lecter allowed. "You would have let Buffalo Bill kill me," she said to Will. "What would you care if Dr. Lecter killed me?"

Will slowly exhaled. "There's a difference."

"Not to me."

"One would be the result of your own actions," Will said. "The other would not be."

"A fine distinction," Clarice said.

Dr. Lecter smiled, obviously enjoying the exchange. "What are we made of, if not fine distinctions?"

Clarice looked back at Will. "Would you have responsibility in one, but not the other?"

“I would have responsibility in either, if they occurred.” Will tilted his head, regarding her with a measured look. “Death was not a foregone conclusion to your encounter with Buffalo Bill.”

“And it would be with Dr. Lecter?”

Will raised a hand in her general direction, as if to emphasize the situation she was already in. “Completely.”

Dr. Lecter looked back and forth between the two of them, plainly waiting to see who would say what next.

Clarice caught his eyes. “I would think such fine distinctions would be inconvenient for you, Doctor.”

“Not at all. They keep things interesting.” His mouth curved into a smirk as he glanced at Will. “And they are not as fine as they used to be.”

“But are unlikely to get any less fine,” Will said dryly.

Clarice knew the conversation was about more than was obvious. Given what Will had done to Buffalo Bill, she more than suspected that he had intended to kill him himself. Everything pointed to Will being a killer in his own right. But at the very least, he was complicit in what Dr. Lecter did, as he obviously hadn’t exercised whatever sway he had for the countless people killed since Dr. Lecter’s first escape. He would have let her walk to her death at the hands of Gumb because he was curious, but he didn’t care to see Dr. Lecter kill her.

She sensed a set of complex rules there, different from Dr. Lecter’s own. Rules that Dr. Lecter apparently enjoyed enough to let Will have his way at times, but rules that didn’t interfere with Dr. Lecter’s own activities often.

“I’m surprised you didn’t kill me yesterday, just for seeing you.” she said to Will.

“You didn’t see anything.” One corner of his mouth crooked up. “You were unconscious.”

“You know what I mean.” She could still place him at the scene. “Why not kill me?”

Will looked darkly amused. “You assume I need a reason not to kill you, rather than the reverse. Every killer has a reason for what they do, even if it’s not discernable to others.”

“Are you a killer?”

“I killed the Red Dragon,” Will said evenly. “By definition I’m a killer.”

She knew he was too smart to directly answer the question, even if she could feel the answer in the air, but she’d been unable to stop herself from asking.

“There is only one reason to kill,” Dr. Lecter said. “To achieve a desired end, whatever that may be. Will would get nothing from killing you.”

Clarice focused on Will even as she answered Dr. Lecter. “I would hope he would get nothing from killing anyone.”

“You and I hope for different things, then.”

“Of that I have no doubt, Doctor,” she said.

Clarice studied Will in the moments that followed. He was loose and relaxed, and though he had been calmly talking about her theoretical death, nothing about his demeanor was setting her on edge. He seemed much like he had the first time she’d met him; she saw nothing of the cold, calculating man she had glimpsed in Gumb’s living room, but she knew they were one and the same.

Even with her profiling background, Will remained an unknown quantity. That wasn’t entirely surprising, given his own gifts. Still, she said, “I don’t understand you.”

Will’s eyebrows raised. “But you understand *him*?” he said, nodding in Dr. Lecter’s direction.

“No. No one understands him.”

Will and Dr. Lecter turned to look at each other in unison, perfect mirror images of movement. Will had a smile in his eyes that didn’t reach his mouth, and one brow slightly raised. Dr. Lecter’s expression was nearly identical, though it almost seemed to be in answer to Will’s own. It was a look shared between themselves, almost like a private conversation they couldn’t resist.

Clarice had known that Dr. Lecter was fixated on Will, and had known that Will was involved with him in some way, but it wasn’t until that instant that she grasped their utter familiarity with one another. The visible delight that had surrounded Dr. Lecter this evening wasn’t because he was free again, and it certainly wasn’t because he had snatched her for a midnight chat. It was because he had Will within arm’s reach, had only to turn his head to lay eyes on him. Will’s own satisfaction hadn’t been as immediately obvious, but now she wondered how she ever could have missed it.

“It seems I was mistaken,” Clarice said. There was one person who understood Dr. Lecter completely.

She was confident that wasn’t a good thing. But it certainly made a lot fall into place. Will might have disappeared years ago, but he had never considered himself lost.

“What happened after you killed the Tooth Fairy?” she asked.

Will glanced back at her, his expression still fixed in the look he had given Dr. Lecter. “We lived.”

His tone was wry, but final. Whatever had happened that night, it would remain between the two of them.

“Indeed we did,” Dr. Lecter said, a smile on his lips. Then he turned to her. “I believe now we should finish our own conversation.”

“Our conversation was a means to an end,” Clarice said, pointedly glancing at Will. “You’ve achieved that end.”

“It doesn’t follow that the conversation itself was without merit, or that its subject was uninteresting.”

It wasn’t like she had much of a choice. All things considered, a conversation was hardly the worst thing that had happened to someone who spent an evening in his company. “Very well, Dr. Lecter.”

He clasped his hands. “After you were orphaned, you went to live with cousins. Why did you run away?”

“I just did,” Clarice said, suddenly unsure why talking about this was worse than talking about her father’s death.

Dr. Lecter gave a minuscule shake of his head, like he was disappointed in her. “Such a drastic action does not occur without a catalyst.”

When she didn’t immediately speak, he prompted her with, “What time of day did you leave?”

“It was early. Still dark.”

“Something woke you, then?”

“Yes.” It was easier to answer in increments for some reason. “I heard a strange noise. It sounded like screaming. But wrong somehow.”

“What did you do?”

“I went downstairs, and then outside. It was coming from the barn. I crept up to the door. I was scared to look inside, but I had to.”

Dr. Lecter was leaning forward slightly, watching her with a quiet intensity. Will was staring vacantly ahead at nothing, but she knew that was not an indicator of his inattention. She wondered if he was seeing what she described in front of his eyes, like he was there with her.

She could still see it.

“What did you see, Clarice?” Dr. Lecter asked.

“Lambs,” she said. “They were screaming.”

“You saw the slaughter of the spring lambs. And then you ran away?”

“No. First I tried to free them. I opened the gate to their pen, but they just stood there. They wouldn’t run.”

“But you could.” A tilt of Dr. Lecter’s head. “And you did.”

“Yes,” Clarice said, her voice catching. “I took one lamb and ran away as fast as I could. I didn’t know where I was going; I didn’t have any food or water, and it was very cold. But I thought if I could just save one… just one… I didn’t get more than a few miles before the sheriff picked me up. The rancher was so angry he sent me to live at an orphanage. I never set foot on the ranch again.”

Will spoke. “What happened to the lamb?”

“He killed him.”

Dr. Lecter’s piercing gaze was focused on her. “You still dream about it,” he said quietly. “You wake up in the dark and hear the screaming of the lambs.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Did you think that if you saved Catherine, you could make them stop? That by saving that one girl, it would be like saving your lost lamb?”

“I don’t know,” Clarice said, unable to look away from his eyes. “Maybe. Not consciously.”

Dr. Lecter looked thoughtful. “And now that you have saved her? Will you still wake up to the lambs screaming?”

“I don’t know.” The silence was heavy between them. “Do you think I will?”

“Things that haunt the echoes of our minds are not so easily dismissed. Perhaps you will have silent dreams, for a time. But that silence may have to be earned again and again. Plight is what drives you, and the plight will not end.”

“I see.”

“I do, however, have a piece of advice for you.”

Clarice was surprised. “Yes, Doctor?”

“It is your nature to rise at the suffering of others. But if you do not moderate your emotional involvement, the first person you cannot save will destroy you. There will be one, and there will be many over the course of your career. It is simply the way the world works; that you would have it be otherwise does not make it so.”

Clarice nodded. It was good advice, she knew. She would do her job the very best she could, but if she put her soul into every case the way she had with Catherine’s, she would end up with nothing of herself left.

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Dr. Lecter nodded in turn. Then he said, “How did you feel after you killed Jame Gumb?”

That got a snort from Will.

“I’m sorry?” Clarice asked.

“You emptied your bullets into Gumb,” Dr. Lecter said. “How did that make you feel?”

Clarice was blunt. “I was terrified beforehand, but then I was relieved.”

“Because?” he pressed.

“Because he was dead and couldn’t kill me.”

Dr. Lecter leaned forward. “And did killing such a bad person feel good?”

“No.”

“Then do you feel guilt for his death?”

“No.”

Dr. Lecter’s eyes narrowed fractionally, considering her. “Most would say he deserved to die.”

“I don’t think I can pass judgment on that,” Clarice said.

“Simple and clean morality,” he commented. “By abstaining from engaging with it altogether.”

“It was kill or be killed. It was something I had to do. If I was uncomfortable with that reality, I wouldn’t be in law enforcement. I don’t feel good about it; I don’t feel bad about it. I neither look forward to nor dread the next time I’m forced to defend myself or others.”

Dr. Lecter searched her face, keenly holding her gaze. After a moment, he said, “You really don’t, do you? It’s something of a rarity.”

“My father was a marshal. It’s an idea I’ve lived with for a long time.”

“Even those in law enforcement seldom find the idea so clean cut in practice.” His mouth twitched. “The first time Will killed someone, he ended up in therapy.”

“Then I consider myself fortunate,” Clarice said. “It seems therapy is not always a success, no matter how skilled the doctor.”

Will, surprisingly, burst out laughing. Dr. Lecter looked amused but intrigued by his reaction, and for a moment his attention was absorbed by Will.

Will’s chuckles subsided, though he still had the ghost of a smile on his lips as he said, “Move on, Hannibal. She’s too good to feel good about it, and too practical to feel bad about it. Your curiosity will have to be satisfied by the act itself.”

Dr. Lecter looked back at her, his face shifting back to a more serious expression, though curiosity still lay beneath it. “Would you kill me? Now, in this moment, if you could?”

“No. Not without cause.”

“Is all that I’ve done not cause enough?” he asked, watching her intently. “Do I not deserve death?”

“Maybe you do. But it’s not my place to give it to you. Not without cause.”

“And of what does cause consist?”

“Putting my life or the lives of others in immediate danger,” Clarice said.

“I am a danger to many lives, even if not immediate. You would not find it your duty to prevent that?”

“I would find it my duty to arrest you. I can’t kill anyone in cold blood.”

“Are you sure? If we sat here until the paralysis wore off, and I gave you back your gun, you wouldn’t shoot me?” he asked, his mouth curving upward. “Perhaps we should try it.”

“Hannibal.” It was a reproach, Will’s tone somewhere between exasperated and fond.

Dr. Lecter turned to look at him. “It sounds like a most interesting exercise,” he said, the grin on his face making it clear to even her that he was joking.

Will stood up from the table. “You forget, I’ve already been through that exercise. She’d shoot you.”

“I didn’t draw my gun to shoot you,” Clarice said. “I drew it because you were giving me every indication that I might need it.”

“I wasn’t going to kill you.”

“You were doing a good job of looking like you might.”

Will shrugged. Then he glanced at Dr. Lecter, raising his eyebrows and waving a hand in the air.

“Yes, we should be going,” Dr. Lecter said, before turning back to her. “You must thank Jack on my behalf, for bringing this case to me. Things have turned out most satisfactorily.”

“Yes, Doctor.” She was satisfied that Catherine was safe and that Gumb was stopped, and that she had come out of an acquaintance with Dr. Lecter unscathed. She was less satisfied that he was free, but it wouldn’t do to mention that. “Is there anything else?”

Dr. Lecter didn’t speak for a long moment. Then he said, “You missed the forest for the trees, Clarice.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You accused me of directing you towards danger when I sent you to meet Will. Having been assured that was not the case, you failed to see that it had been surrounding you since the beginning.” Dr. Lecter tilted his head. “What was catching Buffalo Bill, if not danger? What was I doing, if not directing you to it?”

It was strange that of all the things he’d said tonight, that was what threw her the most. Clarice frowned. “You were using me to talk to Will.”

“That was my primary objective, yes. But I was also curious what would happen.”

Clarice wondered why she hadn’t seen it, before arriving at the answer. She had been part of the investigation, but a minor part of the case, all things considered. “I never assumed I would be the one to confront Buffalo Bill.”

“Did you not? I certainly hoped you would.” With that, he stood. “I thank you for a most interesting conversation. I shall definitely remember it.”

Dr. Lecter and Will moved about the room, both seeming terribly mundane yet completely out of place as they did things like pack and freshen up. Dr. Lecter washed his hands and then made a displeased face as he pulled at the sleeves of his sweater in front of the mirror. They were obviously the wrong length. Clarice tried not to wonder where he’d gotten it.

Will tossed a bag of toiletries in the suitcase, before coming to stand before the table.

“Do you want to stay in the chair, or would you rather be on the bed?” he asked, not looking like he cared one way or the other.

Clarice quickly debated between remaining in the uncomfortable chair all night and the indignity of having him move her. In the end, comfort won.

“The bed, I suppose,” she said.

Will leaned down to pick her up, one arm around her shoulders and one under her knees. He deposited her on the bed with the suitcase, quickly and efficiently, like she was just another chore to deal with before leaving. Then he returned to packing, throwing a final shirt in the suitcase before putting on his coat.

Dr. Lecter crossed the room, coming to stand behind Will, still fiddling with his sleeve. Then he sat on the edge of the bed in an impersonal, professional way, much like, well, a doctor.

He reached over to the suitcase, pulling a roll of duct tape out. Clarice tried not to be surprised they had duct tape in the suitcase, because of course they did. Belatedly, she wondered where Dr. Lecter had gotten the drugs he’d used on her at such short notice. She supposed Will must have had them.

Regarding her, Dr. Lecter tore off a small piece of tape. “The paralysis will wear off before morning. But I can’t have you sounding the alarm after our departure.”

“I understand.” Once they were gone, there would be nothing to keep her from shouting for help, for quickly directing the police to go after them. She could handle having her mouth

taped; Clarice was mostly relieved he wasn't going to drug her again.

He nodded, a smirk playing about the corner of his mouth. "Any last words, figuratively speaking?"

"It's been fascinating, Dr. Lecter. Truly, it has."

"It was my pleasure making your acquaintance." He gave her a smile, genuine but polite, the kind she imagined used to follow pleasant society evenings.

Then he put the tape over her mouth. "Goodbye, Clarice."

Dr. Lecter stood. Will picked up the suitcase. Then they moved together to the door. It shut behind them, leaving her alone, the room like they were never there at all.

Clarice lay awake for what seemed like hours, though she had no way of knowing, as she couldn't see a clock from her position.

Eventually, she slept.

She woke up in the morning. The overhead light above the table was still on, but she could see daylight peeking in around the edges of the curtains.

Clarice moved experimentally, relieved when her arms and legs did what she wanted. She sat up, and then slowly got to her feet. Once in front of the mirror, she gingerly removed the tape from her mouth and then splashed water on her face.

A look out the window revealed that it was very early morning. She also saw that her rental car was parked directly outside the room. Polite of him, to leave her with transportation. A quick search of the room revealed that the keys, her purse, and her gun had been placed in the top nightstand drawer.

Pulling out her phone, Clarice was momentarily surprised that she hadn't had any missed calls, before realizing that as far as anyone knew, she wasn't actually missing. It had been late when Dr. Lecter had taken her, and now it was barely seven o'clock. When she looked at her GPS to find out how to get back to her own motel, she was somewhat surprised to see that she was no longer in Belvedere, but was instead in a town about half an hour away.

Briefly, Clarice considered calling in the fact that Dr. Lecter and Will had been here, but ultimately she knew it would be pointless. The room could be swept, and fingerprints would be found, but that wouldn't do anything but confirm what she already knew.

With a last look around the room, Clarice picked up her things and walked out the door.

She knocked on the door of Crawford's room at eight, coffee and doughnuts in her hand.

He opened it a moment later, looking surprised to see her. “I was heading out. You should be, too.”

“I’ve seen Dr. Lecter.”

Crawford’s brows shot up, and he opened the door wider, gesturing her inside. His eyes ran up and down her as she entered, like he expected to see visible damage. Clarice sat down at the table, and after shutting the door, Crawford did likewise.

“What happened?” he asked.

“He grabbed me last night. He drugged me. And then we talked.”

“You talked,” Crawford repeated, sounding skeptical.

Clarice nodded. “He wanted to talk.”

“What on earth did you talk about?”

“Killing.”

“Killing who?”

“It was more philosophical than that.” She paused. “Will Graham was with him.”

If she hadn’t had Crawford’s undivided attention already, she did now. “Tell me everything,” he said.

Clarice did, relating the whole evening, save the personal story about the lambs. They sat together at the table sipping coffee next to the open window, a marked difference to the interview she’d had the night before.

When she’d finished, Crawford was silent for a long moment. “And what do you make of Will Graham?”

“What do I make of him, sir? You’ve known him for years.”

“And I haven’t seen him in years.” He took a long breath, slowly exhaling. “The Will I knew was a good man. I like to think that Will is still a good man, but that’s my personal relationship with him and I have to put it aside. I can’t ignore evidence. My problem is, we don’t have much evidence beyond speculation, so I’m asking for your input, as the only person that’s seen him recently.”

Clarice gathered her thoughts. “I think he’s a killer,” she said slowly. She was unsure what Crawford wanted to hear, but she knew he wouldn’t like sugarcoated observations. “I wouldn’t know where to begin with profiling him or to guess at what his pathology is, but he’s not a man uncomfortable with the idea of death. He’s smart, and he’s confident, and he thinks in a way that no one else can, and all of that allows him to stay off the radar. He would kill for different reasons than Dr. Lecter does. And if I’m wrong and he’s not a killer, he’s still complicit in Dr. Lecter’s murders, even if you stretch it to being an accessory after the fact.”

Crawford nodded to himself, looking like it was news he had expected to hear but had hoped would be different. “Was there any sign that Hannibal was coercing him?”

“No,” Clarice said, the answer not even requiring contemplation. “They’re together because they understand each other, because they wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

Crawford sighed. For a moment, he looked like a man defeated.

Then he straightened, his face set in the hard lines she was used to.

“Hannibal Lecter is back at the top of the wanted list, obviously,” he said. “Will Graham will go on one, too, for aiding and abetting and for desecration. But beyond that, there aren’t any charges. We don’t even have any forensic evidence tying him to Buffalo Bill’s corpse.”

“I know, sir.”

Will had disappeared just as easily as he had appeared, none worse for the wear and as much of a mystery as he had always been. To her knowledge, she was the only person who had even seen him and known him for who he was. And even her knowing him for what he was did little in the scheme of things. Her assumptions were conjecture and educated guesses, but there was nothing concrete to accuse him of.

Crawford was regarding her thoughtfully.

“Why do you think Hannibal didn’t kill you?” he asked.

Clarice wondered if it was idle curiosity on his part, or if there was a part of him that was wondering why not her, when Dr. Lecter had done so much to others.

“I don’t know,” she said, spreading her hands in a gesture of defeat. She offered a laundry list of the thoughts that had gone through her own head after Dr. Lecter and Will had left her last night. “I wasn’t rude to him. He didn’t have a history with me. I wasn’t a threat to him. He enjoyed watching me play his game. I fit into the world as he viewed it. All of that. None of that. I have no idea.” She paused. “He said that to achieve a desired end is the only reason to kill. He said he had no reason to kill me.”

“He could change his mind.”

“He could,” she allowed. “But he won’t.” Clarice didn’t apologize for or explain the conviction she felt. Even if she didn’t know precisely why Dr. Lecter hadn’t killed her, she was confident that he was fixed in his decision. “Last night was the last time I’ll ever see him.”

Crawford sighed again. “I would say you’re being naive, but God knows I’ve never been able to predict Hannibal Lecter. Maybe you’re right, maybe you’re not—I don’t know. But if you want to stay right, I’ll be the last person you talk to about Hannibal Lecter,” he said seriously. “Because I do know that he dislikes it when people publicize their apparent insights about him.”

“Understood, sir.” She had no intentions of talking to anyone about Dr. Lecter anyway.

Crawford finished his coffee and got to his feet.

“You ready to go wrap up your first case, Starling?”

“Definitely, sir.”

Clarice gathered her things and followed him out the door. The sun was shining clear in the sky, and it was going to be a good day.

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Clarice’s graduation came sooner than it seemed it should, as the rest of her days at the Academy flew by. She received a standing ovation when it was her turn to walk on the stage; her involvement with the Buffalo Bill case was well known by that point. Crawford proudly shook her hand at the reception afterward when he welcomed her to the Behavioral Science Unit.

The following Monday, she walked into the FBI offices not as a trainee, but as a fully fledged agent. She found her way to her very own desk, satisfied that she was one of the first to arrive for the day.

To her surprise, there was already mail in her inbox. Picking up the envelope from the tray, Clarice thought that it looked almost like junk mail. It was addressed to her, but there was no return address, and the postmark was so faint as to be illegible. When she opened the envelope, she found another inside, ivory colored and smooth, the *Clarice* that was written across it in a bold, elegant hand leaving her with no doubts as to who it was from.

Clarice opened the second envelope, pulling out a fine piece of folded stationary with a message written in the same hand. She read the letter once, then twice.

Then she folded the letter back into its original envelope, and put that back in the mailer it had come in. After a moment of deliberation about what to do with it, she simply placed it in her desk.

Clarice smiled in spite of herself and closed the drawer.

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Clarice,

Please accept my sincere congratulations on your graduation. I am sure that you will distinguish yourself admirably in the years to come, and that the world will continue to be a more interesting place with you in it. I would not be averse to sharing another conversation with you, though our paths crossing in such a way seems unlikely.

As for myself and Will, we are far beyond the reach of the FBI. I tell you this as a courtesy, as I would be remiss if I allowed you to waste your valuable time searching for us. You will soon be busy enough pursuing justice in the halls of Behavioral Science that you will seldom have time to think of me. And for some reason, Clarice, I doubt my apprehension would do anything to silence your lambs.

With best regards,

Hannibal Lecter

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I'm on tumblr at fancybedelia!

Florence, nine months earlier

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It was late as they walked the streets together, meandering through the warm darkness with no particular destination in mind.

The night was far enough along that they rarely encountered others. Indeed, the establishment that they had had a late night glass of wine at had closed over an hour ago. Will walked beside Hannibal in an easy, companionable silence that both of them enjoyed neither felt the need to break.

The week had been uneventful in every way, and today had been particularly so. That was why it was a slight surprise to feel the shift in the air around them that announced they were no longer alone.

“We’re being followed,” Will said in an undertone.

“Yes. By a large party, wouldn’t you agree?”

Will inclined his head just enough for Hannibal to see. “I’d prefer to avoid them.”

The quiet steps behind them were still measured, but getting closer. Hannibal touched Will’s wrist with light fingers, just enough to indicate turning around the next corner as they continued at a natural pace.

“No sense of adventure tonight, then?” There was a smile in Hannibal’s voice.

“My sense of adventure disappears when long range weapons come into play,” Will said dryly.

Hannibal chuckled. “Fair enough. Another night, perhaps, at the time and place of our own choosing.”

They had already been near one of the city’s smaller waterways, and the street Hannibal had them on now ran directly along its edge.

There was movement from ahead, and Will realized that the group behind them had either split up to outflank them or had reinforcements. That indicated a police operation.

“Hannibal,” he said in a low voice, part warning and part question.

“Across the bridge,” Hannibal said. “Slowly, until we reach the crest.”

Will nodded. If the police still thought he and Hannibal were unaware of being tailed, they might not immediately follow onto the open bridge. The moment the two of them disappeared from view over the bridge’s crest could be all they needed to slip away if they were quick.

There was no sound of footsteps after them as they started over the bridge as casually as any two companions enjoying the moonlit night.

As they reached the bridge’s highest point, Hannibal’s hand seized Will’s elbow, drawing him to a rough halt. His nostrils flared. “There are more on the other side.” For the first time, he sounded like he wasn’t confident of the evening’s outcome.

Will looked back and forth between the sides of the bridge, seeing shapes beginning to assemble in the darkness. “This was organized.”

“But hastily. Better to come en masse than to risk a more covert operation.”

Will grimaced. “Not quite how I pictured things ending.” He didn’t know what image he had imagined for their final moments together, only that it hadn’t been this.

Will’s hand found Hannibal’s shoulder, gripping the upper sleeve of his jacket. He saw the flash of a knife in Hannibal’s other hand. But when he met Hannibal’s eyes, he didn’t see the gleam of anticipation he’d expected at the prospect of a last stand. Hannibal’s look was fierce, but it all was brutal passion, and all directed at him.

There was shouting in Italian, and figures were starting to converge on the edges of the bridge.

The next instant, Hannibal spun him, pulling Will’s back to his chest and fisting a hand in his hair. The *snick* of a tranquilizer gun being fired sounded, and Will felt Hannibal jerk as it hit its mark. Hannibal drew the dull side of his blade against Will’s throat in a dramatic arc. “I love you,” he said, low and rough in his ear. Then he shoved Will over the bridge’s railing head first.

Will plummeted into the water as Hannibal’s body hit the paved stones above.

He had seen Hannibal’s design even as he fell, the gesture making as profound an impact on him as the water’s harsh embrace.

The scene overhead flashed though his mind: officers swarming the bridge, Hannibal subdued and put into custody, the man he apparently killed dismissed in the commotion. The black depths obscured Will, the current separating them farther with each second that passed.

But he would surface again.

And sometime, so would Hannibal.

Will let the water take him. He could wait.

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